

**The Eroticised Body and the Transcendent Word: Representations
of the Dancer in the Works of
Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats**

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List of Abbreviations

- Ar* Baudelaire, *L'Art romantique*. Genève: Éditions d'Art Albert Skira, 1945.
- ASL* Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*. Oxford, (Oxfordshire); New York: Clarendon Press, 1987.
- ASSL* *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*. Eds. Karl Beckson and John M. Munro. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.
- Au* Yeats, *Autobiographies*. London: Macmillan, 1955.
- AV* Yeats, *A Vision*. London: Macmillan, 1937.
- BLS* Guest, *Ballet in Leicester Square: The Alhambra and the Empire 1860-1915*. London: Dance Books, 1992.
- CCP* Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1968.
- CEP* Donne, *Complete English Poems*. 1994. Ed. C.A. Patrides. London: Everyman, 1996.
- CG* Lifar, *Carlotta Grisi*. Trans. Doris Longley Moore. London: Lehman, 1947.
- CL* Yeats, *Collected Letters*. Ed. John Kelly. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: OUP, 1986-1997.
- Const* Gautier, *Constantinople*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1865.
- CP* Yeats, *Collected Poems*. London: Picador, 1990.

- CPI* Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1952.
- CSI* Symons, *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*. London: Collins, 1918.
- CW* Symons, *Complete Works*. 9 vols. London: Heineman, 1916.
- DBL* Beaumont, *The Diaghilev Ballet in London*. London: Putnam, 1940.
- DP* McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998.
- E&I* Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*. 1961. London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1971.
- Ésd* Gautier, *Écrits sur la danse*. Arles: Actes Sud, 1995.
- Expl* Yeats, *Explorations*. London: Macmillan, 1962.
- FMM* Yeats, *A Full Moon in March, The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1952.
- FRP* Hartman, *French Romanticism on Progress: Human and Aesthetic*. Potomac, Maryland: Studio Humanitatis, 1983.
- GB* Koritz, *Gendered Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1998.
- GSD* "Gautier on Spanish Dancing." Trans. and ed. Ivor Guest. *Dance Chronicle* 10.1 (1987): 1-101.
- GYL* Anna White MacBride and A. Norman Jeffares, eds. *The Yeats-Gonne Letters 1893-1938: Always Your Friend*. London: Hutchinson, 1992.

- Had* Gautier, *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*. 5 vols. Paris: Hetzel, 1858.
- Identity* Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1954.
- It* Gautier, *Italia*. Paris: Éditions d'Aujourd'hui, 1978.
- ITN* Stokes, *In the Nineties*. Hemel-Hempstead: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- LMu* *Le Moniteur universel*. Courtesy of Ivor Guest. Copies of original text translated by Guest, "Gautier on Spanish Dancing." *Dance Chronicle* 10.1 (1987): 1-101.
- LP* *La Presse*. Courtesy of Ivor Guest. Copies of original text translated by Guest, "Gautier on Spanish Dancing" *Dance Chronicle* 10.1 (1987): 1-101.
- LWBY* Yeats, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.
- MAS* Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977.
- MC* Mallarmé, *Correspondance II, 1871-1885*. Ed. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
- Mem* Yeats, *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft Journal*. Ed. Denis Donoghue. London: Macmillan, 1972.
- MM* Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.
- Myth* Yeats, *Mythologies*. London: Macmillan, 1959.

- Oc* Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes de Stéphane Mallarmé*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945.
- Oé* Gautier, *Oeuvres érotiques: Poèmes suivis des lettres à la Présidente*. Charlieu: La Bartavelle n.d.
- PAM* Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory*. London: J. Cape 1928.
- Pc* Gautier, *Poésies complètes*. Publ. René Jasinski. 3 vols. Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1970.
- PD* Kermode, "Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev." *Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Reviews, 1958-1961*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.
- Psl* Gautier, *Portraits et souvenirs littéraires*. Paris: Lévy, 1875.
- RA* Keats, *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Ed. Duncan Wu. 2nd ed. Oxford, U.K., Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998.
- Rf* Gautier, *Récits fantastiques*. Paris: Flammarion, 1981.
- RI* Kermode, *Romantic Image*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.
- SML* Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: Dutton, 1958.
- SMP* Mallarmé, *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*. Trans. C.F. MacIntyre, Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California, Press. 1957.
- Souv* Gautier, *Souvenirs littéraires*. Paris: Hachette, 1882-3.

- TBT* Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- TD* "The Dance, by Arthur Symons (1865-1945)." *About the House: The Magazine of the Friends of Covent Garden* 5.12 (1980): 28-33.
- TG* Richardson, *Gautier: His Life and Times*. New York: Reinhardt, 1958.
- TSZ* Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*. 1961. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 1969.
- TWB* Symons, "The World as Ballet." *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons*. 1924. Vol.8. New York: AMS Press, 1973.
- UP* Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*. Ed. John P. Frayne. London: Macmillan, 1970.
- VE* Gautier, *Voyages en Espagne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- VPI* *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1988.
- YMG* Bradford, "Yeats and Maud Gonne." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 3 (1961-62): 452-474.

Abstract

The Eroticised Body and the Transcendent Word: Representations of the Dancer in the Works of Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats

For a number of French and English writers of the mid to late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the dancer was a central aesthetic symbol. These writers felt alienated from bourgeois society, so they raised art—in particular poetry—almost to the status of religion, with themselves as its priests. Accordingly, art, and the dancer as a symbol of art, were represented as antithetical to all they abhorred. Because bourgeois life was seen as philistine and utilitarian, and dominated by a faith in scientific and economic progress, art could have no purpose other than to exist as pure, transcendent beauty, beauty that was desired, but unattainable; and because bourgeois society was hypocritical, puritanical and bound by rules, art should be free in both expression and form.

Western art has a long Platonist tradition that readily transposed to the Petrarchan worship of the unattainable goddess; it is unsurprising therefore that the beautiful woman dancing on the stage came to be seen as a symbol for art that is remote and spiritual. According to nineteenth-century gender attitudes, however, dancing woman is also seen as sexually available, hence she is the disruptive Other to bourgeois society. Thus, as a symbol for art, the dancer is a site of irreconcilable contradiction: she is both transcendent art, and erotic woman, or, conversely, erotic art, and transcendent woman.

This thesis is concerned with the representation of the dancer as a symbol of art, with its contradictions, in the work of three writers, Théophile Gautier, the nineteenth-century proponent of *l'art pour l'art*, Arthur Symonds the English *fin-de-siècle*, Decadent writer, and W.B. Yeats, the Irish Symbolist writer. For these writers, the dancer, as a symbol for art, is also a threat: they identify with her *because* she is female and Other to patriarchal society, but fear losing their masculine identity as a consequence. Although they attempt to do so, neither Gautier, nor Symonds, nor Yeats resolves the contradictions that their choice of the dancer as a symbol of art presents. For all three writers, to a lesser or greater degree, there is continual oscillation between seeing the dancer as pure art, and erotic woman.

Preface

“The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven”

This image of flight from W.B. Yeats’s poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” (*CP* 235) is the genesis of this thesis. I was in the last stages of completing my Masters degree and, as a distraction from John Webster’s revenge tragedies, I was browsing through the poetry of W.B. Yeats, when the words seemed to spring from the page. They immediately summoned an image of Odette, in the ballet *Swan Lake*, and I recollected Natalia Makarova’s description, in her autobiography, of the swan-ballerina’s arabesques as “passionate, bursting with the desire to break free, with grief, with consciousness of impending doom” (Makarova 36). This, in turn, reminded me of the reference to Anna Pavlova as the *The Dying Swan* in Yeats’s poem “His Phoenix.” So began an exploration of the relationship between dance and literature that led me from W.B. Yeats, to Arthur Symons, and to Théophile Gautier.

This thesis celebrates a reintegration. Dance is a somatic expression which for too long has been treated either as marginal to academic study, or as merely the context for literary criticism, and I found that, having embarked upon academic career, I had divided myself into two beings, the dance professional, and the academic. In my discussion of the images of the dancer in the writings of Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats, however, I bring dance and literature together as equals. In doing so, I seek to contribute to the increasing recognition of dance as an integral part of cultural history, and I offer new perspectives on both dance and literature.

Introduction

The battle for Romantic theatre, the *bataille d'Hernani*, was fought and won on February 25 and 27, 1830, at the first performances of Victor Hugo's play, *Hernani*. A large group of Hugo's supporters at the Comédie-Française out-stamped, out-clapped and out-shouted their opponents, the die-hard defenders of neoclassical drama. And so the young writers, musicians and artists of the day won their cause, freeing drama from stultifying tradition, and setting alight French Romanticism. Among them, flamboyantly dressed in a cherry-coloured waistcoat, was Théophile Gautier, the writer who, eleven years later, wrote the scenario for *Giselle*, a ballet that is still performed, long after *Hernani* passed into history.¹

Hernani came to life on stage amidst the conflict between the conservators of tradition and the iconoclastic Romantics. But the *bataille d'Hernani* is evidence for a much wider conflict, one that is underpinned by the aesthetic doctrine that Gautier propounded in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). That wider conflict is between art and everyday life, and the doctrine is *l'art pour l'art*, the idea that art is the expression of ideal, or pure beauty, and that by its very essence it is transcendent, or divorced from life.² Accordingly, art is seen as serving no utilitarian

¹ For Gautier's reflections on the first performance of *Hernani*, see *Histoire du Romantisme* (Paris: Charpentier n.d.), Chapter 10, "La Légende du gilet rouge" (90-98), and Chapter 11, "Première représentation d'*Hernani*" (99-114).

² The term *l'art pour l'art* was first used in 1804 by Benjamin Constant, and some years later, in 1818, by Victor Cousin in his Sorbonne lectures on the "Nature of Art and the Ideal in Beauty." Cousin is reported by his students to have said that

purpose and is thus the antithesis of bourgeois, positivist values. That the dancer was a central symbol of this aesthetic for Gautier, and also for Arthur Symonds, the self-styled English symbolist poet, and W.B. Yeats, the Irish modernist writer, is the concern of this thesis.

Because the art of dance is fleeting, mobile and non-discursive, and seemingly spontaneous, it expressed the Romantic impulse that had triumphed with *Hernani*: freedom not only from dry academicism, but also from bourgeois utilitarianism. Moreover, because its medium was essentially the *female* body, dance expressed freedom from patriarchal repression and Puritanism. Thus, for Gautier, Symonds and Yeats, the dancer was the embodied symbol for art as Other.

That Gautier saw the dancer as a symbol for *l'art pour l'art* is consistent with the Romantic principles expressed in Hugo's drama. As Peter Brooks points out, Romantic drama was influenced by the immensely popular melodramas that played in the boulevard theatres long before the debut of *Hernani*, and Hugo's dramaturgy owed much to the Manichean world of melodrama. Thus Romantic drama was free from the constraints of the Aristotelian unities, genre, and poetic convention, and placed a greater

Il faut de la religion pour la religion, de la morale pour la morale, comme de l'art pour l'art.... [L]e beau ne peut être la voie ni de l'utile, ni du bien, ni du saint; il ne conduit qu'à lui-même.

See Paul Harvey and J.E. Heseltine, eds. *The Oxford Companion to French Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1969) 31.

As Gene H. Villada points out, the notion that art could be dislodged from its social and political roots owes its existence to the simplified and debased versions of Kant's aesthetics disseminated by Constant and Cousin, and others, and it was these versions which led to *l'art pour l'art* as a full-blown doctrine. Accordingly, Théophile Gautier's notion of transcendent art is the cohesion of ideas that had been gathering momentum since the 1789 Revolution. See Villada *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, c1996.

emphasis on gesture, movement and music, and this translated effectively into the mute and seductive *feminine* art of ballet.³

Two years after the staging of *Hernani*, on March 12, 1832, the Romantic ballet *La Sylphide* graced the stage of the Paris Opéra for the first time. In a major departure from the neoclassical themes of French ballets earlier in the century, *La Sylphide* was loosely based on Charles Nodier's tale *Trilby, ou le lutin d'Argail* (1822) and tells the story of a Scottish farmer, James, who, on the eve of his wedding to Effie, a local village girl, falls in love with a sylph. Wishing to possess this airborne creature who wafts in and out of his presence, he ultimately binds her with a scarf that Madge, the local witch, has assured him will literally bring her down to earth. The sylph's wings fall off, and her fate is sealed; she dies, leaving James bereft.

For Gautier, this ballet swept away those of the past, and epitomised the Romantic spirit, because it presented on stage elusive female ethereal beings who expressed the antithesis of bourgeois masculine positivism, and dry academicism. As he puts it,

[*La Sylphide*] commença pour la chorégraphie une ère toute nouvelle, et ce fut par lui que le romantisme s'introduisit dans le domaine de Terpsichore. A dater de *la Sylphide*, *les Filets de Vulcain*, *Flore et Zéphyr* ne furent plus possible; L'Opéra fut livré aux gnomes, aux ondins, aux salamandres, aux Elfes, aux Nixes, aux Wilis, aux Pèris.... Les douze maisons de marbre et d'or des Olympies furent reléguées dans la poussière des magasins, et l'on ne commanda plus aux décorateurs que des forêts romantiques, que des

³ See Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (London: Yale UP, 1976), 81-93. For the kinship between melodrama and Romantic ballet, see Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998, 49-54.

vallées éclairées par ce joli clair de lune allemande des ballades de Heinrich Heine. (*Ésd* 163)⁴

Gautier's remarks remind us of French Romanticism's origins: the sylphide of the ballet's title is essentially a supernatural being from Northern myth, and she represents the *feminine* exotic Other, an ideal of beauty that is spiritualised and unattainable.⁵

Moreover, *La Sylphide* is a quintessentially Romantic ballet because it presents conflict between opposing forces: on the one hand, there is the bucolic world represented by Scottish peasants and their down-to-earth dancing, and on the other, the carefree supernatural world, personified in the sylph, chaste in her gown of diaphanous white muslin, and seemingly airborne by her elevated dancing. James's pursuit of the sylph is clearly a metaphor for the artist's yearning for transcendent art, and his rejection of earthly existence. Indeed, he is the archetypal romantic hero-cum-poet who abjures a real woman and earthly concerns in his quest for union with ideal beauty.

If the dancing sylph symbolises art's opposition to life, then James's fatal scarf is a symbol for the binding of both woman and transcendent art by prevailing values. As a great deal of scholarship has shown, under the monarchy of Louis-Philippe, France saw the ever-increasing economic power of the French bourgeoisie, and an entrenchment of patriarchal values, and with both, the polarised view of women. According to nineteenth-century gender attitudes, the stage was a public arena antithetical to the

⁴ *Les Filets de Vulcain* (1826) and *Flore et Zéphyr* were concerned with classical myth and were typical of early nineteenth-century ballets. For a comprehensive survey of French ballets before 1830, see Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreography and Narrative: Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996).

⁵ For her translation of Heine's *De l'Allemagne* (1810) and for *De la Littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800) Madame de Stael (1766-1817) is considered to be the precursor of French Romanticism. In both works, she distinguished between Classical and Romantic literature.

private domain of the bourgeois woman, and a career as a dancer was seen as tantamount to one as a prostitute. In fact, it was precisely to make professional dancers available to potential “protectors” that Louis-Désiré Véron established the backstage *Foyer de la Danse*. After the July revolution in 1830, the Paris Opéra was privatised under Véron’s directorship, and opening the *Foyer de la Danse* was one of his strategies in making the Opéra a commercial success. In order to increase audiences, he promoted a patronage system for the *corps de ballet* whereby select groups of men—among them the *corps diplomatique*, the *abonnés*, and members of the Jockey Club—could meet the dancers and arrange assignations. The *Foyer* gave the men who sought dancers’ sexual favours the opportunity to examine them at close quarters and functioned as a kind of exclusive house of procurement.⁶ On the stage the ballerina could appear as a chaste, ethereal, otherworldly creature—the bourgeois male’s ideal of demure femininity—yet always with the promise of sexual availability. In other words, the Romantic ballerina provided the fantasy of the woman who was both madonna and whore.

Nine years after *La Sylphide*, Gautier conceived the idea of the ballet *Giselle* (1841), and it is significant that he created a heroine who has a binary identity: in Act 1 Giselle is an innocent girl, and in Act 2, a seductive vampire-like wili. Yet both roles reflect his bifocal image of woman-as-art: the innocent Giselle is the girl who dances (and loves) too much and goes mad—indicating her transgression of “normal” social codes—and the wili who preys on men is a kind of madonna-redeemer whose transcendent love saves the life of the man who has betrayed her.

⁶ For the background to the establishment of the *Foyer*, see Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (London: Pitman, 1966) 28-9.

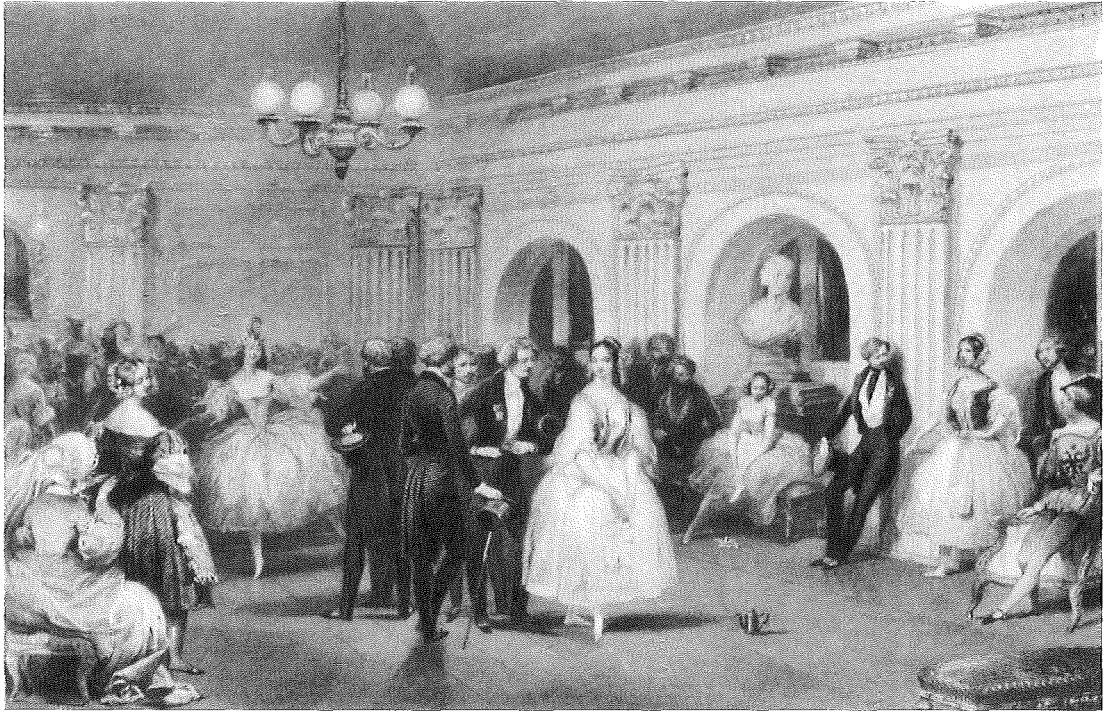


Fig. 1. The Foyer de la Danse, Opera, Paris 1841.

That *Giselle* both reflects and promulgates nineteenth-century gender ideology has been discussed by a number of dance writers, including Evan Alderson, Ann Daly and Jody Bruner. Of relevance is Alderson's view that

the etherealization of the female body that is imaged in *Giselle* represents a particular moment within the general history of patriarchy in which the ascendancy of private economic relations called forth an image of woman at once private and powerful, sacred and spectral, a figure of desire that by inversion of physical presence both accommodates and imaginatively controls feminine sexual power. (131)

And of particular interest are Felicia McCarren's views in *Dance Pathologies:*

Performance, Poetics and Medicine. Here she argues that nineteenth-century ideas of female mental instability and the pathology of the female body were reinforced by the increased prevalence of syphilis, and that these ideas underlie not only *Giselle*, but also Gautier's writing on dancers.⁷ Similarly, in her work on Degas, Anthea Callen shows that contemporary discourses on working-class women characterise them as childlike, atavistic and prone to madness; significantly, as part of her evidence she refers to Degas's depictions of ballet dancers, the *petits rats* of the Paris Opéra.⁸ Moreover, she exposes Degas's depictions of these dancers as voyeuristic: the viewer is placed as if covertly peering at their objectified, and fetishised, bodies through dressing room

⁷ See McCarren DP 70-71.

⁸ For example, Callen shows that, for his sculpture *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years*, Degas used images from the "science" of phrenology and medical theories on deviant female sexuality to produce the "simian" features of the "inferior" working class woman. See Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995), 21-28.

doorways, and from the orchestra pit or the wings. Callen demonstrates that Degas thus views the dancer as he does the prostitute, with the implication that she too is for sale.⁹

As Bram Dijkstra shows in *Idols of Perversity*, representations of women as child-like, elemental, bestial, and/or exotic were prevalent in the *fin-de-siècle*: a significant amount of *fin-de-siècle* art portrays women as symbiotic with nature, ecstatically enclosed by, or prancing about in circles, languishing in post-orgasmic bliss, or mindlessly transfixed by their own image. These images illustrate the prevailing idea that woman is essentially corrupt, and are given authority by the pseudo-scientific ideas of theoreticians and writers such as Caesar Lombroso (to whom Nordau dedicated *Degeneration*), Jules Michelet, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis, to name a few. According to such viewpoints, woman's corrupt nature is often displayed in dance, typically non-balletic.¹⁰ The preferred *fin-de-siècle* dancer has shunned the stage, white gown, *pointe* shoes and tights, and prances freely among the wilds of nature, or kicks her gaudy skirts about her head in the glare of the music-hall, or as Salome, bejewelled and scintillating in her "Oriental" setting, glides seductively before her prey. Indeed, the latter is the quintessential *fin-de-siècle* dancer; from as early as the 1840s Salome—often conflated with Herodias—begins to make her appearance in both art and literature, until, in the late eighteen-nineties, she becomes the symbol of *fin-de-siècle* decadence.¹¹ As I

⁹ Callen's argument is supported by the relationship she shows between Degas's paintings of dancers and his monotypes of prostitutes. See Callen 71-105.

¹⁰ See Dijkstra, *The Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: OUP, 1986).

¹¹ Among the many other French works that feature the Salome figure are Heine's *Atta Troll* (1841), the "Hérodiade" of Banville (1874), Flaubert's "Hérodiades" (1877), Laforgue's *Salomé* (1887), and Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* (1866). The most "decadent" account of Salome is J.-K. Huysmans's description of Moreau's painting. See J.-K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris: Charpentier, n.d.) 72-78. For a survey of the

show later, the Salome figure appears as Cléopâtre in Gautier's story, *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1839), Arthur Symonds wrote a number of lurid poems celebrating her castrating power, and Yeats appropriated her as a symbol for the synthesis of antinomies in life and art. Indeed, Salome, the archetypal Oriental other, dances her way through the works of all three writers as a symbol for art that, in Hugoesque terms, embodies both the grotesque and the sublime. As Amy Koritz puts it,

in practice ... the woman as dancer was figuratively dispersed between the poles of the material and the spiritual in a binary symbolic system that reproduced in art the gender ideology that relegated women at once to nature and the ideal. (Koritz *GB* 5)

Three years before *Hernani* had its tumultuous welcome in the Comédie-Française, Hugo had outlined his doctrine of Romantic theatre in the preface to his play, *Cromwell*. Here, he both proclaims the right to freedom of expression, and presents drama as essentially the struggle between the opposing forces of ugliness and beauty, the sublime and the grotesque, and the flesh and the spirit. In Hugo's words,

Du jour où le christianisme a dit à l'homme: — Tu es double, tu es composé de deux êtres, l'un périssable, l'autre immortel, l'un charnel, l'autre éthéré, l'un enchaîné par les appétits, les besoins et les passions, l'autre emporté sur les ailes de l'enthousiasme et de la rêverie, celui-ci enfin toujours courbé vers la terre, sa mère, celui-là sans cesse élané vers le ciel, sa patrie; — de ce jour le drame a été créé. Est-ce autre chose en effet que ce contraste de tous les jours, que cette lutte de tous les instants entre deux principes

numerous nineteenth-century depictions of Salome, see Ellis 1-85. See also Helen Grace Zagona *The Legend of Salome and the Principle of Art for Art's Sake* (Genève: Librairie E. Droz, 1960), and Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

opposés qui sont toujours en présence dans la vie, et qui se disputent

l'homme depuis le berceau jusqu'à la tombe? (Hugo 18)

The struggle between body and soul that Hugo identified as crucial to Romantic drama is both symbolised and embodied in the dancer; accordingly, whether her dancing is balletic, “free,” or “Oriental,” she is a site of paradox. As a sylph or wili that “flies,” the dancer symbolises ideal, chaste woman and art that is transcendent, but *because* she dances, she is also *erotic* woman, and as such also symbolises “erotic” art.

Although there has been some impressive scholarship in dance aesthetics—especially in Romantic ballet—and in the representation of dance in literature for the period spanning the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the two fields of study are not often brought together. For example, most dance writers pay no attention to Gautier’s wider *oeuvre*, and conversely, most literary critics gloss over references to dance in Gautier’s creative works and ignore his dance reviews altogether. Exceptions to the latter are Deirdre Priddin with *The Art of Dance in French Literature* (1952), and the more recent feminist scholars, Natalie David-Weill with *Rêve de Pierre: La Quête de la femme chez Théophile Gautier* (1989), and Felicia McCarren with *Dance Pathologies: Performance, poetics and Medicine*.

With its focus on French literature, Guy Ducrey’s impressive survey of dance, *Corps et Graphies: Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIXe siècle*, extends Priddin’s work and includes a valuable discussion on Symons, complementing the work of critics such as Chris Snodgrass, Ian Fletcher, John Stokes and Karl Beckson. In fact, these critics (and a number of others) pay considerable attention both to Symons’s representation of the Salome figure and to his reviews of music-hall dancers

as evidence for the decadent aspect of Symbolism. For my purposes, Symons's focus on the dancer as a *predominantly* erotic object is of interest for how it contrasts with both Gautier's and Yeats's views, and thereby highlights the similarities between them: both Gautier and Yeats, in their individual way, see the dancer as a synthesis of the erotic and the transcendent, in art, and in life.

Since Frank Kermode's ground-breaking work in *Romantic Image* (1957), and his essay "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev" in *Puzzles and Epiphanies* (1958), there has been a substantial amount of scholarship demonstrating that Yeats saw the dancer as an aesthetic symbol. Sylvia C. Ellis supports the view that, for Yeats, the figure of the dancer is a symbol for the poetic image. In her book *The Plays of W.B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (1995), Ellis establishes the context of Yeats's work as a playwright, and, self-evidently, focusses on the plays for dancers. On the other hand, in *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams and Early Twentieth-Century Dance* (1997), Terri A. Mester pays only brief attention to the plays and focusses her attention on a number of Yeats's major poems.

Because Symons introduced Symbolist literature to Yeats, critics often discuss, in relation to each other, their writing on the Salome figure; to my knowledge, neither has been considered in relation to Gautier's version of the dancing *femme fatale*. By doing so in this thesis, I show that the figure of the dancer is not only a central symbol of their aesthetic, but that she actually informs it, and that, accordingly, both Symons and Yeats are essentially Romantic in outlook. Moreover, the common thread that links their aesthetic to Gautier's is the notion of transcendent art as the antithesis of bourgeois life, and of the writer as an alienated outsider. In Ernest Sturm's words,

From 1850 to the early twentieth century, from the post-Romantic generation to the last Symbolists, writing meant exile. To write was to engage in an activity external to life, to undergo depersonalization, to struggle with an occupational disease. (Sturm 7)¹²

But as I show, some time before 1850, Gautier was defining himself as the poet alienated from bourgeois, patriarchal society, and living in exile. Born in Tarbes, a village close to the border with Spain, Gautier saw himself as “Oriental,” a racial identification seemingly verified by his swarthy Southern complexion. By implication, he posited the writing persona as essentially feminine. In fact, Symons actually saw himself as “feminine,” and Yeats believed his alter ego or “mask” to be feminine. Thus both writers shared with Gautier the Romantic vision of the artist as the “Oriental” Other in patriarchal and imperialistic societies whose values they despised. And, in a sense, like Gautier, Symons and Yeats were outsiders: Symons was Welsh and saw himself as a gypsy, and Yeats identified with the anti-English Celtic revival and the Irish mythic hero. (Although of Anglo-Irish background, Yeats felt himself to be an outsider when a schoolboy in London and this no doubt reinforced his loyalty to the country of his birth.)

As scholars such as Miyoshi Masao and Elaine Showalter have argued, the late nineteenth century was marked by a crisis of masculine identity fuelled by anxieties about the collapsing of gender boundaries. The belief in a unified, autonomous, and securely gendered subject was crumbling, and hence many creative artists saw themselves as not only alienated from society, but also as “divided” personalities in conflict; in other words, they experienced a heightened awareness of the body/spirit rift.

¹² See Sturm’s introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, or the Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1986).

Indeed, Symons openly proclaimed his “divided” self, significantly, in relation to his response to the dancer whom he proclaimed to be equally erotic flesh and transcendent spirit (even though he saw her predominantly as the former), and Yeats, in an echo of Victor Hugo, considered the essence of identity, like art, to be in its warring oppositions.

The aesthetic of the three writers discussed in this thesis, Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and William Butler Yeats, is essentially Romantic, and for each the dancer is a central symbol. Inevitably, their aesthetic is inextricably bound to their view of themselves and their subjective experience, and is the means by which they define not just art, but themselves as artists. Thus their view of the dancer as an aesthetic symbol is problematised by their being men of their time: because she is woman, the dancer embodies that which both fascinates and repels them; they experience conflict between their view of her both as erotic female body and art that aspires to transcendence.

Each of these writers, Gautier, Symons and Yeats, attempts to resolve this dilemma in his own way. Gautier sees the dancer as bringing to life the pure beauty of classical statuary; he does not discard classical form as an ideal but, rather, animates it with “erotic” life. Accordingly, his counter impulse is to immobilise the dancer, or to preserve and immortalise flesh and blood woman as chaste art; in other words, to “purify” her erotic body. Taglioni in *La Sylphide*, for example, dances with “chaste abandon” (*Ésd* 163), and of another dancer he admired, Fanny Cerrito, he writes that she “rappelle la *Pysché* de Canova,” and that “ses blanches mousselines font l’illusion du marbre blanc” (*Ésd* 283). Symons posits the dancer as an aesthetic symbol, but can never overcome seeing her erotic body as a sign of depravity, and as a mirror in which he sees his own unstable and “sinful” identity: she/he is the “Maenad of the Decadence”

(TD 31). And Yeats, like Hugo, saw conflict as the essence of art and life, developing a highly idiosyncratic and complex system in which the erotic and the spiritual—life and art—are resolved in an ideal of unity that the dancer represents. Her “holy, haughty feet descend / From emblematic niches” (*FMM* 629) so that she becomes transcendent art imbued with life.

Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats all see the dancer as a symbol for art that expresses the antithesis of the patriarchal, repressive values they abhor, but because she is body, and *embodied*, none escapes seeing her as erotic, threatening woman.



Fig. 2. Marie Taglioni, *La Sylphide*.

Chapter 1

Théophile Gautier: The Art of the Dancer, the Dancer as Art

“la vraie volupté est toujours chaste”

When Marie Taglioni (1804-1884) floated across the stage of the Paris Opéra in the title role of *La Sylphide* for the first time, on March 12, 1832, she ushered in, not only Romantic ballet, but also the cult of the ballerina.¹ Seeing her as the quintessential Romantic sylph, Théophile Gautier writes:

Mlle Taglioni vous faisait penser aux vallées pleines d'ombre et de fraîcheur, où une blanche vision sort tout à coup de l'écorce d'un chêne[.] ... Elle ressemblait à s'y méprendre à ces fées d'Écosse, dont parle Walter Scott, qui vont errer au clair de lune, près de la fontaine mystérieuse, avec un collier de perles de rosée et un fil d'or pour ceinture. (*Ésd* 78)

But if the white-gowned, bewinged Taglioni was the quintessential Romantic sylph, there was another kind of ballerina, seen as her polar opposite, and exemplified by the dazzlingly dressed, exuberant and “earthly” Fanny Elssler (1810-1884).

According to Gautier,

Quand Fanny danse, on pense à mille choses joyeuse, l'imagination erre dans des palais de marbre blanc inondés de soleil et se détachant sur un

¹ Less than four months earlier, in November 1831, Taglioni had appeared as the abbess in a scene from Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le Diable* where a group of ghostly lapsed nuns emerged from their graves to dance in the moonlight. Dressed in white muslin, they presented an image of the ethereal, otherworldly ballerina that foreshadowed not only Taglioni's role in *La Sylphide*, but also Grisi's in the second act of *Giselle*.

ciel bleu foncé, comme les frises du Parthénon; il vous semble être
accoudé sur la rampe d'une terrasse, des roses autour de la tête, une coupe
pleine de vin de Syracuse à la main[.] ... [O]n entend bourdonner les
tambours de basque et tinter les grelots au caquet argentin. (*Ésd* 78)²

In what has almost become a cliché, Gautier sums up his view of the two ballerinas with the remark, “Mlle Taglioni est une danseuse chrétienne; Mlle Fanny Elssler est une danseuse païenne” (78).

Gautier's epigrammatic remark contributes to the idea held by many that Taglioni and Elssler represent separate elements of Romanticism. Serge Lifar, for example, sees the dancers as personifying

two currents of taste, two types of the romantic outlook, very different from each other. The first is born of ethereal reveries, of damp and dark woods lighted by a spectral moon, of the desire to make the purified and idealised soul vibrate in regions beyond those of earth, regions real and tangible in the poet's mind and very dear to romantic Germans. The second represents the voluptuous and sensual side, as expressed in luxury and the flamboyant colours of the Orient, in the warm passions of the Moors and of Spain. (*CG* 51)

When the full range of Gautier's writing on dancers is placed in the context of his creative works and his broader aesthetic, however, this dichotomising of the ballerina is shown to be simplistic; what emerge are further contradictions—and similarities—that confound the categories of “spiritual” and “earthly,” or “Christian”

² In contrast to Taglioni's elevated style of dancing, known as *danse ballonnée*, Elssler was an exponent of the more grounded style, known as *danse tacquetée*, that emphasised neat and precise footwork.

and “pagan.” After all, a “Christian” fairy that materialises out of an oak tree to flit about in the moonlight is a contradiction in terms; true to the romantic spirit, she bears the trace of Northern European paganism, Druidism, and fertility rites. Thus the sylph is less distant from her hedonistic Southern counterpart than first appears. Moreover, that Taglioni wears a dew-drop necklace—“un collier de perles de rosée”—suggests not that she is other-worldly, but rather that she belongs to a materialistic world where a woman’s jewellery signals economic power and status, and, when worn by a dancer, a lover’s patronage.³ Equally paradoxical is the vision of a worldly, flamboyantly dressed Elssler with her skin gleaming like the sunlit white marble of a sculptured goddess, remote and elevated upon a Parthenon frieze.

Gautier blurs the oppositions of “spiritual” and “earthly,” and “Christian” and “pagan” because Taglioni and Elssler are expressive dancers, and, as such, can be seen both as erotic woman and ideal art, or conversely, ideal woman and erotic art. Indeed, Gautier’s concepts of the erotic and the aesthetic are so enmeshed that, in his view of the dancer, the boundaries between woman-as-art and art-as-woman often overlap to the extent that it is difficult to tell one from the other. And although Gautier does not see all dancers as erotic, it is invariably partly in terms of the erotic that he evaluates them; the physical appearance and quality of a dancer’s movements are never judged solely by their aesthetic value. In fact, Gautier never dissociates the aesthetic value of the dance from the dancer’s erotic impact.

³ A number of lithographs of Taglioni in her role as the Sylphide show her wearing what appears to be a double-stringed pearl necklace. This gives her the worldly air of a Victorian woman in evening dress, and seems inconsistent with the otherwise ethereal aspects of her costume. See figure 2.

The preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), long regarded as a manifesto for *l'art pour l'art*, gives a context to Gautier's writing on dancers. In one of his most succinct (and often-quoted) statements Gautier writes,

Il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut servir à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignobles et dégoûtants, comme sa pauvre et infirme nature.
—L'endroit le plus utile d'une maison, ce sont les latrines. (MM 45)⁴

Gautier's contempt for what is "utile" is also a rebuke to the bourgeoisie; like all Romantics, he despised the prevailing bourgeois values of France under the July monarchy. In the preface, utilitarianism, a supreme faith in progress, petty-mindedness, and self-righteous Puritanism are all attacked: just as things of use are the antithesis of art, so bourgeois life is anathema to the artist.⁵ Indeed, there is a certain irony (and whimsy) where, with "useless" figurative language, Gautier denigrates petty bourgeois concerns. "On ne se fait pas un bonnet de coton d'une métonymie, on ne chausse pas une comparaison en guise de pantoufle; on ne se peut servir d'une antithèse pour parapluie" (43), he writes, and of "virtuous" Republicans, "Je sais qu'il y en a qui préfèrent les moulins aux églises, et le pain du corps à celui

⁴ As Joanna Richardson notes, Gautier was later to revise his stance on the ugliness of anything useful. See Joanna Richardson, *Théophile Gautier: His Life and Times* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1958) 73. Gautier wrote *Mademoiselle de Maupin* as a young man, and there is, arguably, a certain youthful swagger in his assertions. (*Mademoiselle de Maupin* was first published in 1835 when Gautier was twenty-four years of age.) Nonetheless, in broad terms, Gautier never departed from the aesthetic viewpoint he postulated in the preface.

⁵ As Elwood Hartman points out, Gautier took particular exception to the *Saint-Simoniens* because they believed that art should fulfil a social purpose, and that it had a role to play in the progress of civilisation. See Elwood Hartman, *French Romantics on Progress: Human and Aesthetic* (Madrid: Studia Humanitatis, 1983) 160. For an account of Saint-Simon's political and ethical viewpoint, see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 55-64. For a succinct analysis of the cultural effects of Saint-Simonism, see F.W.J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1789-1848* (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1987) 249-254.

de l'âme. A ceux-là, je n'ai rien à leur dire. Ils méritent d'être économistes dans ce monde, et aussi dans l'autre" (44).

Many aestheticians, art historians and literary critics have suggested that the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* flourished precisely because of the Romantic artist's social and cultural alienation.⁶ Gene H. Bell-Villada, however, suggests that the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* developed specifically as a response to the newly industrialised market that marginalised the poet. Citing Marx's statement that "capitalist production is hostile to certain aspects of intellectual production such as art and poetry," Bell-Villada argues that this alienation was caused by the commercialisation of the publishing industry (50). As he points out, in post-1830 France, the novel and the *feuilleton* developed as marketable commodities, whereas the poem had no economic value. The prose-writer who produced his work quickly often earned a substantial income, while the poet who painstakingly crafted his work over a long period earned little. In other words, poetry was no longer valued, and the poet resented the fact that he no longer held the privileged position enjoyed by his predecessors in the aristocratic circles of pre-Revolutionary France. As a result, Bell-Villada suggests, the Romantic poet developed artistic ideals by which he could parade his gifts as "an aesthetic, spiritual, even moral asset" (50).

Indeed, the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is, above all, a display of Gautier's self-perceived aesthetic, spiritual and moral superiority over his bourgeois compatriots; and, most certainly, Gautier saw poetry as superior to prose—especially

⁶ Albert Cassagne—one of the first and most influential of literary critics to write on *l'art pour l'art*—sees the wider movement as having developed out of the tension between bourgeois realism and the unrestrained idealism of the Romantic artist. According to Cassagne,

Entre la bourgeoisie et l'artiste romantique il y a dès l'abord incompréhension mutuelle et antagonisme.... Rien de plus opposé au réalisme bourgeois que l'idéalisme effréné des romantiques; la beauté qu'exprimait le romantisme était tout autre que celle à laquelle le public était habitué. (Cassagne 15)

journalistic writing. As a letter to Gérard de Nerval shows, Gautier found his work as a journalist particularly onerous. Prevented from joining de Nerval, who was in Cairo at the time (July 1843), Gautier writes:

Moi, je n'ai pas quitté Paris, mille soins m'ont empêché; on a toujours à la patte quelque fil invisible qui se fait sentir au moment où l'on va s'envoler, sans compter le feuilleton, tonneau des Danaïdes où il faut verser chaque semaine une urne de prose, et la page à finir, et la page à commencer. (*Ésd* 134)

To the inevitable question, “why, then, did Gautier so obviously enjoy writing about dancers?” the answer is “because he gained erotic pleasure from observing beautiful women.” In fact, pleasure is an essential element in Gautier’s anti-bourgeois doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*. In the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, he proclaims a kind of divinely sanctioned Epicureanism where the purpose of life is not to eschew pleasure, but to indulge it:

la jouissance me paraît le but de la vie, et la seule chose utile au monde. Dieu l’a voulu ainsi, lui qui a fait les femmes, les parfums, la lumière, les belles fleurs, les bons vins, les chevaux fringants, les levrettes et les chats angoras; lui qui n’a pas dit à ses anges: Ayez de la vertu, mais: Ayez de l’amour, et qui nous a donné une bouche plus sensible que le reste de la peau pour embrasser les femmes. (46)

Implicitly, Gautier refers to *jouissance* in the sexual as well as the non-sexual sense; where freedom of expression is the antithesis of bourgeois repression, it gives pleasure that is both artistic and sexual. In fact, Gautier conflates the two.

Putting aside the sexist overtones in his inclusion of women among the “things” of life to be enjoyed, there are aesthetic implications in Gautier’s outlook

that relate directly to his notion of beauty and the dancer. Significantly, in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier polarises the useful and the beautiful in reference to women. He acknowledges that “une femme soit médicalement bien conformée, en état de faire des enfants,” but then dismisses ironically this procreative “function” as being, essentially, the concern of economists (45).

Gautier’s rhetorical “A quoi sert la beauté des femmes?” parallels “A quoi bon la musique?” and “à quoi bon la peinture?” (45), and makes the point: conceptualised female beauty is purposeless and, accordingly, it shares with music and painting the status of art.⁷

Accordingly, Gautier insists that “la première condition qu’on doive exiger d’une danseuse, c’est la beauté” (*Ésd* 54), and, as he puts it, “Je renoncerais très joyeusement à mes droits de Français et de citoyen pour voir un tableau authentique de Raphaël, ou une belle femme nue” (*MM* 45-6). If the beautiful dancing woman who displays her body provides Gautier with a pleasure equivalent to that of gazing at an art object, by implication, she *is* an art object. Indeed, the pleasure of looking at beautiful dancers allows Gautier to override the aesthetic limitations of the ballets in which they appear. As he puts it in his review of the ballet-pantomime *La vivandière*, “nous sommes très capable de regarder avec plaisir sautiller une jolie danseuse à travers une action absurde” (*Ésd* 225).

⁷ Unsurprisingly, then, male dancers are the objects of contempt precisely because they are not female, therefore ugly and lacking erotic appeal. In Gautier’s words,

Vous savez quelle chose hideuse c’est qu’un danseur ordinaire; un grand dadais avec un long cou rouge gonflé de muscles, un rire stéréotypé, inamovible comme un juge; des yeux sans regard, qui rappellent les yeux d’émail des poupées à ressort; de gros mollets de suisse de paroisse, des brancards de cabriolet en façon de bras, et puis de grands mouvements anguleux, les coudes et les pieds en équerre, ... des ronds de jambe, des pirouettes et autres gestes de pantins mécaniques. Rien n’est plus horrible. (*Ésd* 31-2)

Jules Janin, another dance critic, and Gautier’s contemporary, writes in a similar vein. See Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (London: Pitman, 1966) 21.

There is, then, a sense in which Gautier's writing on the dancer could equally apply to woman depicted in sculpture or painting, because the aesthetic appeal of the dancer is literally in what he sees: "La danse ... ne s'adresse qu'aux yeux" (32). (It is worth recalling that the word aesthetic derives from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, to perceive.) In fact, Gautier goes so far as to suggest that the entire *raison d'être* of dance is to provide *visual* pleasure: "La danse ... n'a d'autre but que de montrer de belles formes dans des poses gracieuses et de développer des lignes agréables à l'oeil; c'est un rythme muet, une musique que l'on regarde" (42). Nevertheless, where dance is an abstract display of harmonious structure, it is also a visual metaphor for the drama of sexual interplay:

La danse se prête peu à rendre des idées métaphysiques; elle n'exprime que des passions: l'amour, le désir avec toutes ses coquetteries, l'homme qui attaque et la femme qui se défend mollement forment le sujet de toutes les danse primitives. (42)

Because both form and content are expressed through the dancer's body, dance gives visual form to, or reifies, the abstract principles of art (rhythm and shape), while simultaneously staging that body as the focus of male desire. Accordingly, the dancer is as much a sexual object as she is an aesthetic one.

In addition to seeing the ideal dancer as one who synthesises the erotic and the aesthetic, Gautier frequently dissociates her physical beauty from her *moving* body to the extent that her artistry seems almost irrelevant. Consistent with seeing the woman as the object of desire, Gautier describes the dancer's physical attributes in the manner of a Petrarchan blazon, presenting dancers not as expressive subjects, but as a series of objectified component parts. For example, he prefaces his comments on Fanny Cerrito's dancing in *Lalla Roukh* with an acknowledgement that he *is*

focussing on her body, remarking, “Commençons par le *physique* ... nous examinerons ensuite les moyens” (*Ésd* 194, Gautier’s emphasis). Then, by noting approvingly that Cerrito is unusually pretty and rounded, Gautier, effectively, disregards her as a dancer:

La Cerrito est blonde: elle a des yeux bleus très doux et très caressants, une sourire gracieux quoique trop fréquent peut-être; ses épaules, sa poitrine, n’ont pas cette maigreur caractéristique des danseuses.... Ses bras ronds et potelés n’affligent pas les regards par de tristes détails anatomiques; ils se déploient avec grâce et souplesse.... Le pied est petit, cambré, la cheville fine et la jambe bien tournée[.] ... [E]n somme, l’ensemble est jeune, séduisant, et produit une impression favorable.
(194)

Gautier likewise catalogues Carolina Rosati’s physical attributes, portraying her not as a whole body moving through space, but as the components of a static work of art. Gautier sees

abondants cheveux noirs, oeil noir, sourcils noirs, teint olivâtre qui blanchit aux lumières, quelque chose d’antique dans les attaches du col, dans les lignes pleines et fermes de la poitrine et des bras; les jambes un peu fortes terminées par un petit pied nerveux, bien cambré, bien soudé, aux chevilles fines. (279)

By focussing on her discrete parts, Gautier denies Rosati’s agency as the dancing subject, thereby reinforcing her status as sexual object. Moreover, when dancing *en pointe* her “orteil d’acier ... se pique au sol comme un fer de javelot” (279). This image has a somewhat phallic connotation that ironically reinforces the notion of dance as an expression of *female* sexual power unrestrained by bourgeois

decorum; or, put another way, the dancer's beautiful and seductive body parts are metonymic for art which is sexualised *because* it is an anti-bourgeois activity.⁸ Significantly, for Gautier, the seductive and aesthetic qualities of feet and limbs, along with the dancer's own apparent pleasure in performing, dominate all other considerations:

Si le pied est petit, bien cambré et retombe sur sa pointe comme une flèche, si la jambe, éblouissante et pure, s'agite voluptueusement dans le brouillard de mousselines; si les bras s'arrondissent, onduleux et souples comme des anses de vases grecs; si le sourire éclate, pareil à une rose pleine de perles, nous nous inquiétons fort peu du reste. (225)

It is natural that Gautier should list highly arched feet and strong pointe work as a dancer's prerequisites because these are the technical requirements of her art. But throughout his reviews, he refers so frequently to small feet as to betray a fetishistic bias. Not only do Rosati and Cerrito have "un petit pied" (234, 279), but also Carlotta Grisi (188), Adeline Plunkett (182) and Fanny Elssler (49), to name a few. Indeed, nineteenth-century fetishism may explain why many contemporary lithographs of Romantic ballerinas depict feet so absurdly small and tapering that they seem incapable of carrying a dancer's weight, let alone able to project her into the air.⁹ Reminiscent of the Chinese woman's bound "lily" foot, the Romantic

⁸ It is intriguing to note that in her essay "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe" Susan Leigh Foster reclaims female sexual power as a metaphor for the dancer's subjectivity.

⁹ See the illustrations in *Écrits sur la danse*, for example, of Adèle Dumilâtre, Carlotta Grisi between pages 188-89, 278-90. See also Parmenia Migel, *Great Ballet Prints* (New York: Dover, 1981). In many of the lithographs reproduced in this book, the ballerinas are depicted (consistent with their roles) as if they were airborne, and such images are enhanced by the wings that sprout from their diaphanous costumes and by their tiny "useless" feet. Of special interest are the lithographs of Marie Taglioni by Chalon. The lithograph by Cattier from the drawing by Achille Devéria, however, shows a sturdier and barefooted Taglioni (albeit airborne) (Migel 12). As Migel points out in her introduction, lithographs small enough to be carried around in wallets were extremely popular as souvenirs (vii).

ballerinas' feet poised *en pointe* or hovering above ground, clearly emphasise their unearthly status. In fact, Gautier actually expresses “wonder” at seeing bound feet on “la lady chinoise” when visiting the Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1852.¹⁰ His reaction is hardly surprising given that bound feet are, in a sense, art because they are all but useless.

Consistent with how he sees the dancer, Gautier fetishises the foot at the same time as he admires it as an artefact. That, as such, it is synecdochic for the dancer in her dual status as woman and art is implied in his macabre short story “Le Pied de momie” (1840).¹¹ Telling his story retrospectively, the narrator relates how he had purchased an embalmed foot for use as a paper holder and then discovered that it not only talked, but also moved, or “danced”: he tells us that “il s’agitait, se contractait et sautillait sur les papiers comme une grenouille effarée” (*Rf* 185). Towards the end of the story, he tells how he restores the foot to its owner, the four-thousand-year-old living corpse of a beautiful, young Egyptian princess named Hermonthis. Despite its ironic tone—as a reward for restoring the foot to the princess, the narrator asks for her hand in marriage because “la main pour le pied me paraissait une récompense antithétique d’assez bon goût” (192)—the story’s underlying concern is serious. In becoming physically whole, the “living” princess is reunited with her mummified ancestors; thus beautiful transcendent woman—the work of art—is restored to her/its

Interestingly, contemporary lithographs also depict male dancers with small feet. Such depictions are not inconsistent with the artistic convention’s gender bias, since, arguably, the *danseurs* are feminised precisely because dance was seen as a feminine art and they do not conform to the bourgeois construct of masculinity as socially dominant and economically productive.

¹⁰ See Richardson *TG* 104. Interestingly, in Gautier’s short story “Omphale,” the narrator observes that Omphale, the woman in the tapestry, has “petits pieds, vrais pieds d’Espagnole ou de Chinoise.” See *Rf* 105.

¹¹ In the light of Freudian and post-Freudian theory, the term “fetishistic” has implications I do not pursue here. In its original meaning, fetishism is the worship of an object imbued with a spiritual presence, and, on one level, this is how Gautier views the dancer’s body. Later in the chapter, I consider the deeper implications of fetishism as they apply to Gautier’s “Medusan” gaze that “immobilises” the dancer as an art object.

rightful place in a mythical past far removed from a bourgeois world where everything has a function.

Gautier's preoccupation with the permanence of art, I discuss fully in the next chapter. Of relevance here is how Gautier's representation of the aesthetic qualities of the preserved, or immortalised foot, relate to the dancer. Significantly, the aesthetic qualities of the mummy's foot immediately fascinate the narrator; he recalls that

Il avait ces belles teintes fauves et rousses qui donnent au bronze florentin cet aspect chaud et vivace ... des luisants satinés frissonnaient sur ses formes rondes et polies par les baisers amoureux de vingt siècles....

Je fus surpris de sa légèreté; ce n'était pas un pied de métal, mais bien un pied de chair, un pied embaumé, un pied de momie: en regardant de près, l'on pouvait distinguer le grain de la peau et la gaufrure presque imperceptible imprimée par la trame des bandelettes. Les doigts étaient fins, délicats, terminés par des ongles parfaits, purs et transparents comme des agathes; le pouce, un peu séparé, contrariait heureusement le plan des autres doigts à la manière antique, et lui donnait une attitude dégagée, une sveltesse de pied d'oiseau; la plante, à peine rayée de quelque hachures invisibles, montrait qu'elle n'avait jamais touché la terre. (182)

The narrator's obsessive concern with the detail of the foot shows that he fetishises it both as an erotic body part and as an art object. Furthermore, because it seems never to have touched the earth—there is the implication of flight in its bird-like grace—the foot has a transcendent beauty which embalming has rendered permanent. The

dancer, as Gautier sees her, sexual object and artefact, is similarly fragmented and whole, living and non-living.

In “Le Pied de momie,” the narrator observes the skin-pattern of the mummified foot mingled with the patterning of the bindings; similarly, in his portrait of the ideal dancer cited above, Gautier presents the image of the voluptuous and “pure” leg revealed intermittently through a haze of layered muslin. That there is an erotic charge in the glimpse of a woman’s leg that is, in a sense, veiled, shows that, for Gautier, the attraction of the Romantic ballerina is as much as, if not more than, in what her dancing reveals, as in the dancing itself. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau reminds us in her article “The Legs of the Countess,” the nineteenth century was a period in which the legs of “proper” women remained hidden; thus “the legs of ... dancers are the focus of the fetishizing gaze of the male spectator” (Solomon-Godeau 288). Moreover, Solomon-Godeau refers to a *carte-de-visite* dated 1856, by A. A. E. Disdéri, entitled *Les Jambes de l’Opéra* on which are displayed more than fifty pairs of disembodied female dancers’ legs, all exposed from at least the knee down (287). That nine sets of these legs are those of women dancers *en travesti*—they are clad in “male” tights and reveal rounded, feminine thighs—reinforces the illustration’s appeal to fetishism.¹² As further evidence of the appeal of ballet dancers’ legs to the nineteenth-century male gaze, Solomon-Godeau cites an article from the *Illustrated London Life* dated April 16, 1843. Here, the writer declares the stage to be “a kind of gallery of sculpture” dedicated to the display of legs, pre-eminently those of certain Paris Opéra ballerinas:

¹² The feminisation of dance brought with it a taste for women dancing male roles. See Lynn Garafola “The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth-Century Ballet,” *Dance Research Journal* 17-18 (Fall 1985-Spring 1986) 35-40.

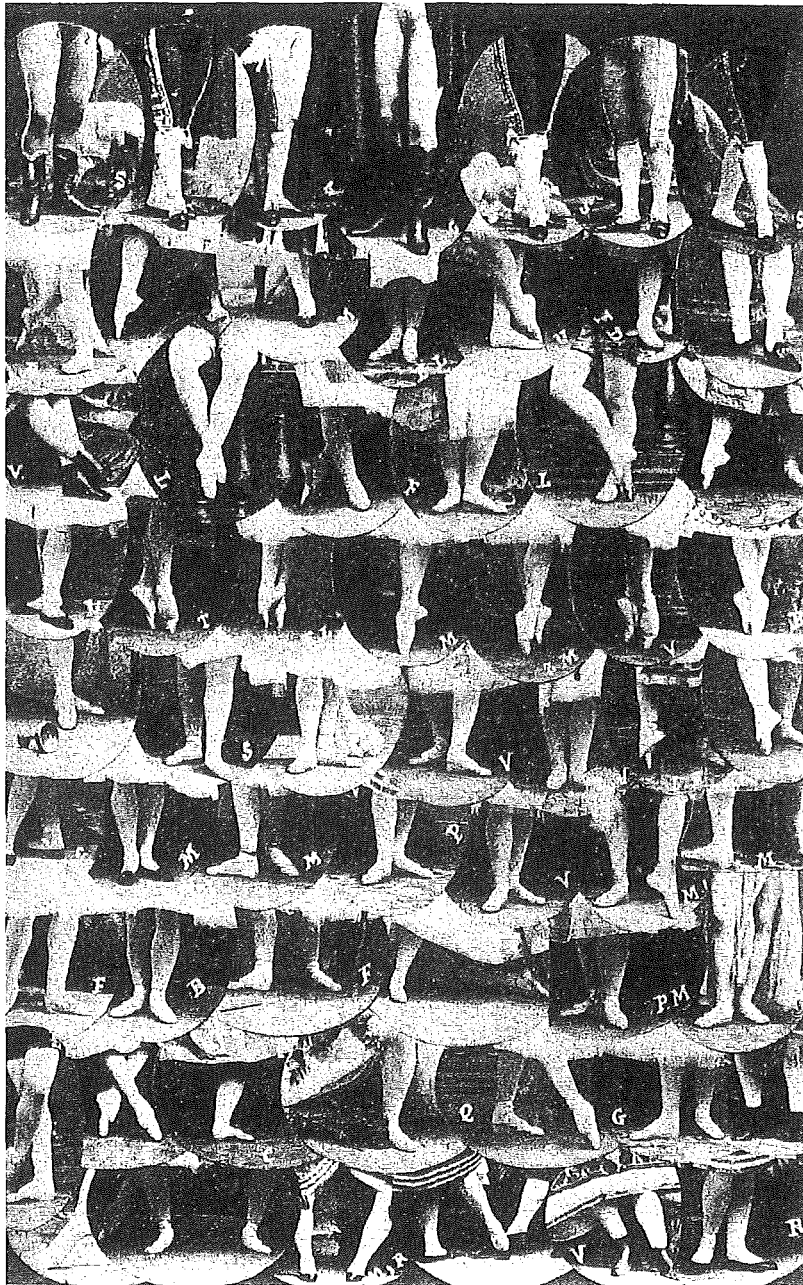


Fig. 3. A.A.E. Disderi, Les Jambes de l'Opera (carte-de-visite).

the legs of Fanny [Elssler] displayed a vast deal of propriety and frightened sober men from their prescribed complacency. Taglioni's legs encompassed a great deal of attention; Cerrito's leg magnified excitement; Duvernay possessed a magic leg ... the Opera is a bazaar of legs. (Qtd. in Solomon-Godeau 286)¹³

As his reviews show, Gautier has an interest in dancers' legs that, on one level, is consistent with contemporary attitudes. For example, he describes Augusta Maywood's legs in terms implicitly sexual: because she is gifted with remarkable elevation and agility, Gautier sees the legs of a "biche sauvage" and "jarrets de jaguar" (104). By animalising her physical strength and technical skill, he effectively opposes Maywood's "deviant" femaleness to the cultured femininity of the bourgeois ideal, and implies that her dancing is an expression of sexual availability. As Gautier's readers would have known, "biche" is a term of endearment; but it also signifies a woman of easy virtue.

Even the legs of the "spiritual" Taglioni are erotic: as Gautier puts it: "Les jambes fluettes de Mlle Taglioni ... [soulevent] des nuages de mousselines" (64). By his use of syntax, Gautier personifies Taglioni's legs as the agents of movement and self-display; that *they* raise her skirts, rather than the momentum generated by the dance is highly suggestive of sexual display, as is Gautier's choice of the verb *soulever*, with its further meaning of provocation and excitation. That the ability to "voltige[r] comme un esprit" (41) derives from physical strength and control is the paradox of all dance, but it is a paradox that Gautier construes according to his own

¹³ From Ivor Guest, "Dandies and Dancers," *Dance Perspectives* 37 (Spring 1969): 4.

aesthetic values; for him, “spiritual” art expressed through the medium of a powerful, female dancing body inevitably carries an erotic charge.

Whether or not Taglioni’s role as the sylph influenced Gautier’s aesthetic directly (*La Sylphide* was first performed three years before the publication of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*), it presents an image of the ballerina that foreshadows his idea of the female dancing body as a metaphor for freedom of expression that conflates the artistic and the sexual. Although Gautier writes of Taglioni as the “Christian” dancer (he also calls her “la danseuse des femmes” [78] with all that that implies of bourgeois decorum), he can scarcely have been unaware of the pagan inferences in her role as the sylphide. In her affinity with oak trees, and her inclination to flit about in shadowy valleys, the sylph inhabits the domain beyond “civilised” society, and literally outside the private sphere of middle-class women.¹⁴ That the sylph enjoys freedom to pursue the man she desires is immediately apparent in *La Sylphide* when the curtain rises on a domestic, interior setting with the hero James fast asleep in a chair whilst she gazes adoringly upon him. Having chosen James as the object of her desire, the sylph has invaded the human sphere, and soon disrupts the status quo by sabotaging his imminent marriage to Effie, his village sweetheart. That she chooses James, in itself, is evidence of her passionate and transgressive nature, even though she is presumably “innocent” of self-knowledge. Moreover, to construe James’s obsession with her simply as the Romantic hero’s yearning for an *abstract* idea of the unattainable is to ignore what would have been, for the audiences of the time, the highly seductive power of the ballerina/sylph’s *physical* presence. Interestingly, in his review of Taglioni when she returned to the

¹⁴ The sylph has a kinship with the malicious sprites and fairies that preoccupied Victor Hugo in his *Ballades* (1823-28). See Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres poétiques*, tome. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 499-574.

role in 1844, Gautier writes of the sylphide's death caused by the loss of her wings as "empruntée ... à l'histoire des insectes." He then makes an observation that clearly places the dancing creature (and art) outside the civilised, human domain: "Les fourmis vierges ont des ailes qui leur tombent dès qu'elles ont aimé. La nature a tout prévu, même les dénouements de ballet" (155). If the white-gowned sylphide is a "spiritual" being, she is also instinctively sexual. Accordingly, *La Sylphide* can be perceived as a prefigurative metaphor for *l'art pour l'art*: the essence of art is simultaneously transcendent (chaste) and free from bourgeois values (erotic). When James attempts to possess the sylphide by curtailing her freedom and "grounding" her as an ordinary woman, he destroys her; without wings she can no longer dance, exert her seductive charms, or "fly." In other words, "feminine" art is destroyed by "man's" attempt to restrain it.

The contradictory way in which Gautier actually sees Taglioni-the-dancer as Taglioni-the-woman is shown in his review of her performance before Louis-Philippe at the Palais de Compiègne in September 1836. Here, he blurs the distinctions not only between the woman and dancer, but also between the dancer and her role; the Dionysian qualities of abandon and voluptuousness co-exist with purity and divinity, and art with secular impulses. Taglioni, "la chaste et la divine danseuse," Gautier sees as hovering

en l'air avec si mol abandon, des poses si voluptueusement mourantes, avec tant d'art et de naturel, tant de simplicité et de pudeur, que le roi enchanté, pour lui exprimer sa satisfaction, lui a fait présent d'une magnifique agrafe de saphir; entourée de brillants d'un grand prix, tout à fait digne de la main qui la donnait et de celle qui la recevait. (27)

By bringing her to earth as a woman who receives gifts from powerful men, Gautier undercuts his image of Taglioni as a supernatural being: the dancer can never be totally separated from the woman, or her art from her essence as woman. In addition, the references to poses of languid, or “dying” voluptuousness, and abandoned movement show that, in the actual performance, the qualities of airiness and sensuality are not mutually exclusive. Gautier also refers to these seemingly paradoxical qualities when he reviews Taglioni’s later performance as the sylphide in a restaging of *La Sylphide* at the Paris Opéra in 1838. Although he regrets her loss of elevation and lightness—in yet another reminder of her earthly nature, he attributes this to fatigue from overseas travel—Gautier notes that “c’est toujours la blanche vapeur baignée de mousselines transparentes, la vision aérienne et pudique, la volupté divine que vous savez” (77).

If Gautier eroticises the aesthetically “pure” Marie Taglioni, conversely, he aestheticises the erotic qualities of Fanny Elssler. Eulogising Elssler’s legs, he writes that they have “un tour élégant et pur, rappellent la sveltesse vigoureuse des jambes de Diane, la chasseresse virginale” (49). Furthermore,

les rotules sont nettes, bien détachées, et tout le genou est irréprochable, ses jambes diffèrent beaucoup des jambes habituelles des danseuses ... ce ne sont pas ces mollets de suisse de paroisse ou de valet de trèfle qui excitent l’admiration des vieillards anacréontiques de l’orchestre et leur font récurer activement les verres de leur télescope, mais bien deux belles jambes de statue antique dignes d’être moulées et amoureusement étudiées. (49)

In comparing the beautiful legs of Elssler to those of Diana, the *virginal* goddess of Roman mythology and to those of an ancient statue, Gautier acclaims them as “pure”

Classical art. (In a later review, Gautier sees the beauty of Elssler's legs actually surpassing that of Classical art: "Les jambes de Diane sont fines, sèches, un peu longues," whereas Elssler's have "un contour plus nourri, quoique aussi ferme," and "une rondeur voluptueuse de lignes dont la chasseresse est dénuée" [57]). His aesthetic appreciation is apparently what differentiates Gautier's—the poet's—gaze from that of the "vieillards" (and presumably the philistines): they are satisfied with ogling the unattractive legs of the *corps de ballet* through their binoculars, whereas he perceives the superior qualities of the body transformed by art. Indeed, it is as an art lover that Gautier appreciates Elssler's beauty: where she is "élégant, joli, proportionné ... le regard monte et descend comme une caresse au long de ses formes rondes et polies que l'on croirait empruntées à quelque divin marbre du temps de Périclès" (56).

Furthermore, physically "*ensemble*" (56, Gautier's emphasis), Elssler "ressemble ... au fils d'Hermès et d'Aphrodite, à l'androgyné antique, cette ravissante chimère de l'art grec" (57). Thus Elssler seems to be the living embodiment of Mlle de Maupin/Théodore, the androgyné who represents the ideal of beauty and unity in Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. If she reifies the reunified, ideal state of "man," Elssler reveals the Platonic bias of Gautier's aesthetic: the yearning for oneness as allegorised in *The Symposium*. Indeed, as I show in the next chapter, what drives Gautier's aesthetic—his contempt for, and wish to escape from, bourgeois mediocrity, and his belief in beauty, pleasure, and non-engaged art—is ultimately his desire for transcendent unity.

For the moment, however, it is important to note that Gautier compounds Elssler's duality as body and art object with gender ambiguity. Her remarkable beauty derives from her status as both "masculine" dancing woman and "feminine"

sculpted man. “Ses bras admirable tournés,” Gautier notes, are “moins ronds que des bras de la femme ordinaire” and “plus potelés que de bras de jeune fille.” Thus

leur linéament a un accent souple et vif qui rappelle les formes d’un jeune homme merveilleusement beau et un peu efféminé comme le Bacchus indien, l’Antinoüs ou le statue de l’Apolline; ce rapport s’étend à tout le reste de sa beauté que cette délicieuse ambiguïté rend plus attrayante et plus piquante encore. (57)

Moreover, because Elssler’s dancing blurs gender boundaries, it is powerfully seductive:

à travers la langueur amoureuse, la passion enivrée qui ploie sous le vertige du plaisir, la gentillesse féminine et toutes les molles séductions de la danseuse, on sent l’agilité, la brusque prestesse, les muscles d’acier d’un jeune athlète. (57)

Interestingly, in *Le Diable boiteux*—the ballet in which she danced her famous *cachucha*—Elssler also performs *en travesti*: in Act 3, scene 2, she appeared dressed in military uniform as a petty officer. Since this occurred *after* her *cachucha* in act 2, her appearance no doubt provided an extra *frisson*; it is unlikely that Gautier (and the audience at large) would have dissociated the sexiness of the woman from that of the “man.”

As Disdéri’s *carte-de-visite* reflects, such was the nineteenth-century cult of the ballerina that *danseuses* frequently performed male roles. Likewise, there was a taste for female *pas de deux*, and not the least in popularity were those danced by Fanny and her sister Thérèse, one such being a duo in the ballet-pantomime *La Volière*. Indeed, it is in his review of this duo that Gautier launches a diatribe against male dancers. If “rien n’est plus abominable qu’un homme qui montre son cou

rouge, ses grands bras musculeux, ses jambes aux mollets de suisse de paroisse,” by contrast, “Rien n’est plus doux et plus harmonieux à l’oeil” than two women dancing, “l’une ... l’ombre de l’autre” (60). Lynn Garafola suggests that thus Gautier sees the Elssler sisters as “evoking an Arcadia of perpetual adolescence untroubled and untouched by man” (39). Even so, she points out that “the fantasy of females at play for the male eye [is] a staple of erotic literature” (39). When considered in the light of Gautier’s portrait of Elssler cited above, this *pas de deux* does not present asexual dancers remote from men, but rather, women who in effect double their physical appeal. Garafola concludes that Gautier sees the Elsslers’ duet as hinting at an ideal “attainable only in the realms of art and the imagination—not the real world of stockbrokers and municipal councillors” (39). That ideal is the fantasy of female licentiousness contained and purified by art.

Because “Elle danse de tout son corps, depuis la pointe de cheveux jusqu’à la pointe des orteils” (42), Elssler inspires Gautier’s belief that dance is “musique que l’on regarde” (42). Although Gautier wrote this in his review of Elssler’s performance as Alcine in a ballet named *La Tempête*, he no doubt had in mind her dancing of “l’audacieuse cachucha” (42). This was the seductive Spanish solo on which Elssler’s reputation as a “pagan” dancer rests, and one she originally performed as the courtesan Florinda in *Le Diable boiteux*.¹⁵ In contrast to the cool images of Elssler’s sculpted, static body parts, Gautier describes her *cachucha*, danced with her “whole” body, as alive with warmth and uncontained movement:

La voilà qui s’élance, les castagnettes font entendre leur babil sonore;
elle semble secouer de ses mains des grappes de rythmes. Comme elle se

¹⁵ For a detailed description of the *cachucha* and its background, see Ann Hutchinson, *Fanny Elssler’s Cachucha* (London: Dance Books, 1981).



Fig. 4. Fanny Elssler in the *Cachucha*.

tord! comme elle se plie! quel feu! quelle volupté! quelle ardeur! Ses bras pâmes s'agitent autour de sa tête qui penche, son corps se courbe en arrière, ses blanches épaules ont presque effleuré le sol. (Qtd. in Lifar, *Giselle* 242)

Joellen A. Meglin points out that the *cachucha* was traditionally a couple dance (280), and she argues that by performing it solo, Elssler took the audience as her partner. In other words, Elssler provided wish-fulfilment: each man in the audience could fantasise that she danced with, or for, him. Indeed, where Gautier writes about the *cachucha*, he focusses at least as much on the titillating effect of Elssler's costume as on her dancing:

[Elssler] s'avance en basquine de satin rose garnie de larges volants de dentelle noire; sa jupe, plombée par le bord, colle exactement sur ses hanches; sa taille de guêpe se cambre audacieusement et fait scintiller la baguette de diamants qui orne son corsage; sa jambe, polie comme le marbre, luit à travers le frêle réseau de son bas de soie; et son petit pied, en arrêt, n'attend pour partir que le signal de la musique. Qu'elle est charmante avec son grand peigne, sa rose sur l'oreille, son oeil de flame et son sourire étincelant! (Qtd. in Lifar, *Giselle* 242)

Moreover, Gautier represents Elssler as concluding her dance with a gesture that signals its raison d'être: she seems to reach out towards the audience. In his words "Ne diriez-vous pas qu'avec cette main qui rase l'éblouissant cordon de la rampe, elle ramasse tous les désirs et tout l'enthousiasme de la salle?" (243). In a sense, Elssler violates the boundary between the stage and auditorium, because, in Gautier's words,

The footlights are a frontier of fire dividing ... the real world from the world of imagination; the audience must not be allowed to cross it.

Beyond this frontier reigns illusion; perspective creates new depths, light creates enchantments; tinsel seems gold; rouge seems the freshness of youth; the characters, like the decorations, are painted, and from this collection of harmonious lies emerges relative truth, which is the truth of art. (Qtd in Richardson 59)¹⁶

That Elssler almost crosses the “frontier of fire” means that she tells not the “harmonious lies” of art, but the “truth”: that she is presenting herself to men for their appraisal, and that she invites them to perceive the stage as if it were the *Foyer*. Accordingly, Elssler’s performance is more about staging herself as a sexually available woman than it is about art. And if thus there is a blurring between what is “real” seductiveness and its artistic representation, this is especially so given that originally Elssler danced the *cachucha* in *Le Diable boiteux* in her role as a courtesan. (Interestingly, as I show below, when Gautier compares her *cachucha* with the Spanish dancer Dolores Serral’s, he is critical of Elssler’s coquettishness because he sees it as lacking authenticity.)

Gautier sees Elssler as poised on the boundary between fantasy and reality because she is openly provocative; if Taglioni is “la danseuse des femmes” because her sexuality is shrouded in white gauze, then Elssler is “la danseuse des hommes” (78) because hers is overt. Not surprisingly, Gautier’s ideal is “Elssler et Taglioni dans la même personne” (218), the ballerina in whom the qualities of earthliness and transcendence, erotic woman and chaste art exist in perfect harmony. And Gautier

¹⁶ This appeared in *La Presse* March 28, 1854, some time after Gautier’s remarks regarding Elssler’s *cachucha* first appeared in *Les Beautés de l’Opéra*, 1845.



Fig. 5. Carlotta Grisi in *Giselle*.

found her in Carlotta Grisi, the ballerina whom he idolised for the rest of his life.

After seeing Grisi dance in *La Filleule des fées*, he writes:

Quelles poses charmantes, quelle volupté décente et naïve, quelle poésie ingénue[,] ... quel abandon dans le tour de force, quelle grâce dans la vigueur; que de choses impossibles aisément faites! ... Terpsichore elle-même ... y perdrait son grec, et toute muse qu'elle est, n'en ferait pas autant avec son brodequin antique que notre jeune Italienne avec son petit chausson de satin. (240)

Gautier wrote this in 1849, eight years after Grisi appeared as the first Giselle, the role he considered as much hers as the sylphide was Taglioni's (163). In fact, the ballet *Giselle*, with its scenario written by Gautier, effectively stages Grisi as the embodiment of the erotic body/pure art synthesis, and as a whole can be seen as a metaphor for the writer's aesthetic.¹⁷ Binary in structure, *Giselle* presents the apparently dual nature of its heroine. In Act 1, Giselle is woman, in Act 2, she is spirit; but when considered in the light of Gautier's aesthetic viewpoint, these categories are as superficial as the dancer's contrasting "worldly" and "spiritual" costumes, because the two states of being interpenetrate. In both acts, Giselle is the essence of woman-as-art, or art-as-woman. Indeed, named after her, *Giselle* draws attention to the ballet as a metaphor for the dancer as woman, and as a work of art.

Act 1 of *Giselle* shows a passionate young woman whose love for her suitor Albrecht (disguised as the peasant Loys) is expressed through her love of dance. As Gautier puts it in his letter to Heinrich Heine (July 5, 1841), "[Giselle] adore Loys,

¹⁷ In fact, Gautier's scenario was modified for performance by the dramatist Vernoy de Saint-Georges.

elle adore la danse” (119).¹⁸ Thus Giselle expresses a freedom that establishes both her worldliness and her otherworldliness: in Gautier’s words, “elle s’empare de l’espace, bondit et rebondit avec un enivrement de liberté et une joie de ne plus être comprimée par cet épais drap de terre lourde” (122). Just as an intoxicating freedom and joy are qualities of Giselle’s earthly nature, so, like transcendent art, they have no social purpose. Giselle’s dancing is therefore a threat both to herself and to the status quo. Indeed, Giselle’s mother, Berthe—the voice of utilitarianism—chides her daughter for not putting her energy to more productive use; in Gautier’s words:

sa mère ... la gronde, et voudrait voir ce pied si agile faire bourdonner le rouet à l’angle de la fenêtre, et ces jolis doigts ... occupés à cueillir la grappe déjà trop mûre ou à porter le panier d’osier des vendangeuses. (119)

Furthermore, because Giselle dances too much, she risks death and transformation as a wili, one of the undead women who at night snare unwary men and dance them to death. Berthe warns Giselle, “tu danseras toujours, tu te feras mourir, et après ta mort tu deviendras Wili!” (119). The consequence of pursuing art in life is the permanence of art in death.

As Felicia McCarren demonstrates, according to nineteenth-century constructs of women, a love of dancing suggests an immoderate sexual appetite and even an inclination to madness. In his original scenario, Gautier had the wilis appear in a ballroom because there they could indulge their “désir insatiable de contredanses, de valse, de galops et de mazurkas,” and also recruit “quelque nouvelle compagne”

¹⁸ This letter reveals how Gautier was inspired by Heinrich Heine’s *De l’Allemagne* (1835) to write the scenario for *Giselle*. Gautier was also influenced by Victor Hugo’s poem “Fantômes,” about a young Spanish woman who dies from dancing too much: “Elle aimait trop le bal, c’est ce qui l’a tuée.” See Hugo, *Les Orientales*, II (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1968) 134. For a complete background to *Giselle*, see Binney, 53-104.

(121).¹⁹ The social context of the wilis' dancing is important, because, at the time, social dancing was an immensely popular bourgeois activity and all of the wilis' dances were part of the ballroom repertoire. Indeed, if Gautier was influenced by Heine's account of the wilis, Heine, in turn, was reminded of the wilis by the abandon with which Parisian women danced. In his story "Florentine Nights," Heine portrays them as women on the brink of madness and death:

The Parisienne must not be studied in her domestic life, where she is pinned down, but in the salon, at soirées and balls, where she flies freely with wings of embroidered gauze and silk among the flashing crystal crowns of delight and gaiety! Then is revealed in her an eager rapture in life, a longing for sweet sensuous oblivion ... by which she is made almost terrible in her beauty, and gains a charm which at once enraptures and shocks our soul.

This thirst to enjoy life, as if in another hour death would snatch them away from the sparkling fountain that would in another hour be sealed forever—this haste, this rage, this madness of the Parisiennes, especially shown at balls, always reminds me of the legend of the dead dancing-girls who are called by us willis (*sic*). (Heine 69-70)

Arguably, on one level, *Giselle* is a didactic ballet because it warns bourgeois women of the consequences of immoderacy, but because Giselle is costumed in diaphanous white, she is usually seen in terms similar to those applied to the "Christian" Taglioni-sylphide, and such a view is supported by the way she dances redemptively in order to save Albrecht's life. This is to ignore (as have early dance

¹⁹ Gautier's setting of the wilis' dancing in a ballroom was changed by Vernoy de Saint-Georges to the moonlit forest where the dancers appeared dressed in Taglioni-esque white gowns.

scholars, and many ballerinas) the erotic dimension of Giselle's "spiritual" dancing. As Gautier's letter to Heine serves to remind us, the wili-Giselle is as powerfully seductive as her new band of sisters; so much so, in fact, that even the cross over her grave does not protect her lover:

Giselle danse d'abord timidement at avec beaucoup de retenue; puis son instinct de femme et de Wili l'emporte, elle s'élance légèrement et danse avec une grâce si voluptueuse, une fascination si puissante, que l'imprudent Albrecht quitte la croix protectrice et s'avance les mains tendues, l'oeil brillant de désir et d'amour. (123)

Recent readings of *Giselle* recognise the seductive nature of the wilis and their desire to dance men to death as tantamount to vampirism, with all that that connotes of sexual predation. Jody Bruner, for example, sees Act 2 from a Kristevan perspective, arguing that it "mobilizes all the elements of the abject psychological economy" because the wilis are "both seductive women and repulsive corpses" (Bruner 110), and that accordingly, Giselle's adagio is "an extraordinary display of erotic power" (111). This reading is valid, but it fails to take account of Gautier's aesthetic, according to which Giselle's seductiveness as both woman and corpse is a metaphor for the "eroticism" of *l'art pour l'art*, in other words, the freedom of expression that defines the Romantic impulse. Seen in this way, the wilis' life beyond death symbolises art eternalised by its triumph over the grave, and Giselle embodies beauty that in Kantian (and Hugo-esque) terms is both sublime and horrifying.

A later ballet for which Gautier also wrote the scenario, and in which Grisi danced the leading role, was *La Péri* (1843). Set in a harem in Cairo, *La Péri* features a melancholy hero, Achmet, who yearns for an ideal love. The peri appears

to him in an opium-induced dream, in the form of a beautiful supernatural being. Although the ballet centres on Achmet's yearning for transcendence—as Gautier puts it, “le ciel [est] le rêve de la terre, telle est l'idée fondamentale de ce poème tourné en ronds de jambe” (*Ésd* 138)—its true focus is on the peri's reciprocal desire for earthly pleasure. By implication, the spiritual dimension of art can only be recognised through its materialisation, here expressed through the desiring female body.

La Péri is famous for two of the peri's dances—the *pas du songe* in Act 1, and the *pas de l'abeille* in Act 2—both of which express the polarities of woman-as-art whereby the ballerina is both spirit and matter, transcendent and earthly. In the *pas du songe*, the peri abandons her celestial domain in order to enjoy worldly pleasures by symbolically leaping from the “clouds” into the arms of Achmet. Also indicative of the peri's desire is that she tests Achmet's love by incarnating herself as Leila, a dead slave girl. And it is as Leila that the peri dances the provocative *pas de l'abeille*: as she plucks a rose, she disturbs a bee that flies into her dress, and frantically she sheds first her tunic, then her scarf, and finally her skirt. Then, in Gautier's words, “elle tombe bien aux genoux d'Achmet, haletante, éperdue, souriant dans sa peur, plus désireuse d'un baiser que des sequins d'or” (142). On one level, the dance was nothing more than a vulgar striptease, and, as Edwin Binney points out, it was audacious of Gautier to introduce it into a ballet staged at the Opéra because it was originally a dance performed by Egyptian courtesans and had been banned as obscene by the Viceroy Mehemet Ali (1769-1849).²⁰ But for Gautier, beauty transcends vulgarity, and, just as the dance revealed the “divine” physicality

²⁰ See Binney 118. See also Guest's comment on how Gautier calls Mehemet Ali “pudique” (*Ésd* 141).



Fig. 6. Carlotta Grisi performing the *pas du songe* from *La Peri*.

of the celestial peri, so it displayed the “innocent” eroticism of the woman-who-dances:

Si tu savais avec quel chaste embarras Carlotta se débarrasse de son long voile blanc; comme sa pose, alors qu’elle est agenouillée sous les plis transparents, rappelle la Vénus antique souriant dans sa conque de nacre; quel effroi enfantin la saisit lorsque l’abeille irritée sort du calice de la fleur; comme elle indique bien les espoirs, les angoisses, toutes les chances de la lutte; comme la veste et l’écharpe, el le jupon où l’abeille cherchait à pénétrer, s’envolent prestement à droite, à gauche, et disparaissent dans le toubillon de la danse. (141-42)

(Ironically, the fact that Grisi soon replaced the *pas de l’abeille* by a more modest—and highly inappropriate—*bolero* speaks volumes of the dancer’s discomfort with its blatant appeal to voyeurism.)

That *La Péri* contained an erotic dance within an “Oriental” setting indicates that Gautier’s aesthetic principles are inextricably bound to his anti-bourgeois stance, and it is important to note that Grisi, an Italian woman dancing as a peri, doubly fills the role as exotic Other. Indeed, the dancers who most eloquently express the eroticism that Gautier sees as intrinsic to *l’art pour l’art* are those whom he sees as the *authentically* “Oriental.”²¹ For example, where he writes about the *bayadères*—the troupe of Indian dancers who performed in Paris in 1838—Gautier

²¹ For a background to Orientalism in French Romanticism, see Pierre Jourda *L’Exotisme dans la littérature française depuis Chateaubriand* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970). For a general background, see Binney 105-162. Of his period’s fascination with the exotic, Victor Hugo writes:

Les études orientales n’ont jamais été poussées si avant. Au siècle Louis XIV on était helléniste, maintenant on est orientaliste. Il y a un pas de fait. Jamais tant d’intelligences n’ont fouillé à la fois ce grand abîme de l’Asie.... [L]’Orient, soit comme image, soit comme pensée, est devenu, pour les intelligences autant que pour les imaginations, une sorte de préoccupation générale (*Les Orientales* 10-11).

comments that “elles sont charmantes, d’une authenticité irrécusable” (66).²² He then identifies a particular dancer named Amany as “la plus belle ... de la troupe,” followed by a lengthy description of her physical attributes and her costume—the Oriental otherness of her skin, her hands, and her feet which, predictably, “sont d’une petitesse et d’une distinction extremes” (66). In fact, Amany’s feet preoccupy Gautier the most:

la cheville est mince, dégagée, l’orteil séparé des autres doigts, en pied d’alouette, comme dans les anciennes statues grecques; les flancs, le ventre, les reins pourraient lutter, pour la délicatesse et l’élégance, avec ce que l’art antique nous a laissé de plus parfait. (66)

Moving from legs to arms, to head, face and hair, and to the exotic details of Armani’s dress, Gautier continues to eulogise the dancer for seven extended paragraphs (66-68), revealing an almost obsessive concern with the dancer as an aesthetic, and fetishised, *objet d’art*.

The Spanish dancers who regularly performed in Paris held a particular fascination for Gautier because he saw a “lien mystérieux [qui] rattache la danse espagnol à la danse orientale” (266). This link is the innate eroticism that he sees in dancers who move freely, sensuously—and animalistically—with their whole bodies. In the case of Spanish dancers, Gautier attributes these qualities directly to the Moorish influence. He refers to this influence at some length in his travel book *Voyage en Espagne* when writing of the dancers he saw perform a *baile nacional* in Málaga.²³

²² For more details of the Bayadères’ appearance in Paris, see Guest’s notes, *Ésd* 65-66.

²³ The *baile nacional* was an interlude of traditional Spanish dances.

C'est le corps qui danse, ce sont les reins qui se cambrent, les flancs qui ploient, la taille qui se tord avec une souplesse d'almée ou de couleuvre. Dans les poses renversées, les épaules de la danseuse vont presque toucher la terre; les bras, pâmés et morts, ont une flexibilité, une mollesse d'écharpe dénouée; on dirait que les mains peuvent à peine soulever et faire babiller les castagnettes d'ivoire aux cordons tressés d'or; et cependant, au moment venu, des bonds de jeune jaguar succèdent à cette langueur voluptueuse, et prouvent que ces corps, doux comme la soie, enveloppent des muscles d'acier. Les almées moresques suivent encore aujourd'hui le même système: leur danse consiste dans les ondulations harmonieusement lascives du torse, des hanches et des reins, avec des renversements de bras par-dessus la tête. Les traditions arabes se sont conservées dans les pas nationaux, surtout en Andalousie. (*VE* 349-50)

The “lien mystérieux” between Spanish and Oriental dancing is one to which Gautier frequently refers throughout his writing on Spanish dancers. When Dolores Serral dances the *cachucha*, for example, she “kindles all the ardour and all the passion of the Orient” (GSD 30) and Concepción Ruiz dances “Comme l'Almée de l'Orient, elle se tortille seule sur son tapis devant le maître jaloux” (*LMu* June 4, 1855).²⁴ Moreover, Petra Cámara conveys

l'accablement voluptueux et la léthargie bercée de rêves d'opium de l'Orient. On dirait une sultane, Chaine-des-Coeurs ou Zoraïde, que le fils du prophète a forcée de quitter, ivre d'amour et de parfums, son divan de brocart d'or dans une des salles festonnées de l'Alhambra, pour danser devant lui. (*LP* May 19, 1851)

²⁴ The quote in English comes directly from Guest's “Gautier on Spanish Dancing,” because I have been unable to source a copy of the appropriate review in its original French.

Accordingly, Gautier concludes that “Rien n’est moins français que la danse de la Petra Cámara” (*LP* May 19, 1851).

For Gautier, Cámara’s dancing is superlatively un-French because it expresses through the *whole* body an “Oriental” freedom from repressive cultural and social practices. In other words, the orientalist body of the dancer is a symbol for Romantic art—*l’art pour l’art*. Moreover, the symbolic power of the Spanish dancer’s body is heightened by her dress: with their riotous display of colour and ornament, Spanish costumes express all the spontaneity, energy and abandon of their wearer. Writing of Petra Cámara’s “triumphant costume,” Gautier focusses almost fetishistically on its detail:

imaginez un étincelant fouillis de boutons en filigrane, de passequilles, de houppes de soie, d’agrémens, de soutaches, de franges, de broderies et de tout ce qu’un passementier en délire peut coudre d’ornemens (*sic*)
fantasques après un corsage et une basquine! (*LP* July 6, 1853)

Indeed, Cámara’s costume is metonymic of the dancer herself: “c’est coquet, sauvage et fou; cela luit, fourmille, papillote et danse à l’oeil; même quand la danseuse est immobile, les volans de sa jupe battent des entrechats et les couleurs de ses fanfreluches se livrent à des cachuchas” (*LP* July 6, 1853). Similarly, the Fabiani sisters’ costumes are studded with sequins that “accrochent la lumière par points brusques et inattendus, et fourmillent vivement à l’oeil” (*Adf*I:14).

If such visual effects signal the vitality of the exotic, somatically whole dancer, they also provide a contrast to moribund, academic convention—and to clichéd images of the ballerina in white. In a seeming about-face, considering his delight at seeing glimpses of thigh through white muslin, Gautier considers that “La manière de se costumer des danseuses espagnoles est de beaucoup préférable à celle des

danseuses français, qui paraissent vouées à la mousseline blanche depuis mademoiselle Taglioni” (*Adf* 1.15). This anti-French bias is clearly related to Gautier’s distaste for neoclassicism, and it is interesting to note that in describing his first impressions of the Piazza San Marco, he uses images of the dancer that, on the one hand recall his view of her as classical form, and on the other, as a besequinned *almée*:

Comment exprimer ces tons roses du palais ducal, qui semble vivre comme de la chair, ces blancheurs neigeuses des statues, dessinant leur galbe dans l’azur de Véronèse et de Titien, ces rougeurs du Campanile que caresse le soleil, ces éclairs d’une dorure lointaine, ces mille aspects de la mer, tantôt claire comme un miroir, tantôt fourmillante de paillettes comme la jupe d’une danseuse? (*It* 86)

This description seems to sum up Gautier’s paradoxical image of his ideal dancer and her role as an aesthetic symbol: she embodies the purity of (man-made) classical form that her dancing—the expression of the instinctive, feminine, “oceanic” self—brings to life. (That Gautier uses the sea as a metaphor for the feminine principle, *and* as a metaphor for the unconscious, forms part of my discussion in the next chapter.)

Significantly, Gautier personifies the Ducal Palace as if it were flesh and, by association, eroticised *female* flesh: he might be describing, for example, Fanny Elssler’s marble-like body warmed by sunlight, and caressed by his eroticising gaze. In *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Peter Brooks discusses the importance in the Western tradition of the body as an object of desire, and he argues that desire “is originally and always, with whatever sublimations, sexual” (Brooks 5). Thus “the erotic body both animates and disrupts the social order” (Brooks 6).

Indeed, Gautier's many depictions of the dancer's body as erotic *are* disruptive in the sense that he consciously uses them to attack the academicism and bourgeois values he sees as antithetical to his aesthetic principles. He delights in Dolorès Serral's erotic qualities, for example, as a means of indulging his contempt for traditional French ballet training. "[N]ous avons dit comment cette souplesse, cette vivacité et cette passion andalouses étaient supérieures aux poses géométriques et aux écarts à l'angle droit de l'école française" he writes, before going on to explain that in the past "les gens du bel air trouvaient la danse de Dolorès bizarre, sauvage, contraire aux saines traditions de l'école et aux règles du bon goût" (*Had* 1: 282). Warming to the subject, Gautier continues with a diatribe against ballet masters, pedagogues, and classicists for their negative response to the *cachucha*:

En effet, que signifient, s'écriaient les classiques, cette démarche onduleuse et brisée, ces yeux noyés d'amour, ces bras morts de volupté, cette tête qui s'incline comme une fleur trop chargée de parfum, cette taille flexible et cambrée qui se renverse éperdument en arrière de façon à faire presque toucher la terre aux épaules, ces mains agiles et fluettes qui réveillent la langueur de l'orchestre par le pétillant caquetage des castagnettes? C'est de la danse de carrefour et de bohème! Que diriez-vous d'une pareille barbarie, ombres de Gardel et de Vestris? Parlez-nous des ronds de jambe, des pointes, des ballons, des gargouillades, des flicflacs et des pas de Zéphire, voilà qui est beau, noble, académique, majestueux, français! Ce sourire stéréotypé n'est-il pas des plus convenables? y-at-il (*sic*) au monde quelque chose de plus agréable qu'une femme qui tourne sur l'ongle de son orteil avec une jambe

parallèle à l'horizon, dans la gracieuse attitude d'un compas forcé? De cette façon, le goût ne se corrompra jamais. (*Had* 1: 282)

By contrasting the sensual movements of Spanish dancing to the classical *pirouette à la seconde*, a step accomplished by the legs, not the whole body and which he likens to a compass opened at ninety degrees, Gautier emphasises his contempt for the delimiting precision of neoclassicism. More obliquely, he also attacks positivism, and the prevailing faith in scientifically driven progress.

Inextricably bound to his contempt for dry academicism is Gautier's abhorrence of ballet dancers who lack expressiveness, and this lack he attributes directly to what he sees as the absence of both physical beauty and sexual appeal. In his most sustained and cruel attack on French dancers—undoubtedly the poorly paid, working-class *petits rats* of the Paris Opéra *corps de ballet*—Gautier focusses, not on their dancing, but on their extremely thin bodies. The image he presents is tantamount to a caricature: the dancers

sont maigres comme des lézards à jeun depuis six mois; et quand on les regarde sans lorgnette au plus fort de leur danse, leur buste, à peine perceptible dans le frêle tourbillon de leurs bras et de leurs jambes, leur donne l'apparence d'araignées qu'on inquiète dans leurs toiles, et qui se démènent éperdument.... [L]es clavicules éclairées en dessous font une horrible saillie transversale où viennent s'attacher, comme des cordes de violon sur leur chevalet, quatre à cinq nerfs tendus à rompre, sur lesquels Paganini aurait joué facilement un concerto. Le larynx, rendu plus sensible par le maigre, fait une protubérance pareille à celle que fait au cou d'une dinde une noix avalée tout entière, et c'est en vain qu'on chercherait dans la plaine de leurs charmes la moindre rondeur.... Quant

aux membres inférieurs, ils sont d'une grosseur tout à fait disproportionnée, de sorte qu'il semble que l'on ait vissé le corps scié en deux d'une petite fille phthisique sur les jambes d'un grenadier de la garde. (*Ésd* 32)²⁵

The last image, somewhat reminiscent of a Victorian children's book whose divided pages produce disharmonious bodies for comic effect, casts a final slur by implying that the *danseuses* are as ugly as their male counterparts and equally unfit for the stage. After all, according to the principles of *l'art pour l'art*, ugliness is associated with usefulness, hence mediocrity and bourgeois values. Women, like art, and women *as* art, should be beautiful, and exist only for the Romantic poet's visual pleasure.

For Gautier, Spanish dancing is a touchstone for measuring not only the dancer's beauty and expressiveness, but also the spectator's (and his own) aesthetic sensibilities. When a performance by Rosa Espert and Joaquina Segura is cancelled, he blames "Certaines imaginations chastes, dont la pudicité trouve partout des infamies que les libertins ne connaissent pas" (*LP* August 18, 1851), and takes the opportunity to ridicule balletomanes for their hypocrisy and inferior taste, and, implicitly, to acclaim the "innate," and "superior" eroticism of Spanish dancers:

Les idées de décence en fait de chorégraphie sont vraiment bien singulières; ainsi une danseuse peut jeter sa jambe au nez de son danseur, comme un tireur de savatte qui veut donner un coup de pointe de soulier dans l'oeil d'un fashionable, sans que personne s'en formalise, et cela

²⁵ It is interesting to note that Gautier is equally vicious in his attack on a pair of unattractive and sexually unappealing Spanish dancers whom he saw perform the *baile nacional* in Vitoria, Spain. See Gautier, *VE* 58-59. In fact, nineteenth-century caricatures of dancers were not uncommon. For example, Gautier's ridicule of the dancer Louise Fitzjames for her appearance as an asparagus in a *Ballet des légumes* has a parallel in an illustration by Caboché Grégoire. See Guest, *Ésd* 32, in the illustrations following page 278.

en faisant ballonner ses jupes de gaze de manière à ne dérober de son corps que la place couverte par la ceinture ... et c'est toujours à ce moment là qu'on applaudit la danseuse.—Les jolies et les chaste,—il y en a,—sont obligées de pratiquer cet écartèlement sous le feu de la rampe et des lorgnettes. Mais par exemple danser avec langueur et passion, dans l'enivrement du rythme et des oeillades des amoureuses ... sans envoyer l'ourlet de son jupon aux frises, voilà qui révolte et ne saurait se tolérer. (*LP* August 18, 1851)

To be “authentically” erotic, then, the dancer, like art, should be innocent of the effect she has on an audience; she should refrain from displaying her body and her technical skill merely to solicit the audience's approval. This is illustrated by Gautier's comparison between Dolorès Serral's “authentic” performance of the *cachucha* and the renditions by Fanny Elssler and Lise Noblet.²⁶ That he makes a distinction between Serral's eroticism and theirs indicates that, on one level, Gautier sees the dancer who overtly uses her sexual appeal to enthrall her audience as artistically dishonest. In contrast to Serral's dancing which he elevates to a quasi-religious plane, Elssler's and Noblet's is almost heretical:

La cachucha est pour Dolorès une foi, une religion: on voit qu'elle y croit; elle l'exécute avec toute l'âme, toute la passion, toute la candeur et tout le sérieux possibles. Fanny Elssler et Mlle Noblet la dansent un peu en incrédules, plutôt par caprice ou pour éveiller un peu les lorgnettes du public, ce sultan blasé, que par conviction réelle. (*Ésd* 44)

Elssler and Noblet are, furthermore, “toutes deux vives, coquettes, spirituelles et point amoureuses, crime impardonnable dans une cachucha” (44), whereas “dans les

²⁶ Interestingly, it is thought that Dolorès Serral taught Fanny Elssler the *cachucha*.



Fig. 7. Dolores Serral and Mariano Camprubi in the *Cachucha*.

écarts les plus excessifs de cette danse si vivre et libre, [Serral] n'est jamais indécente; elle est pleine de passion et de volupté, et la vraie volupté est toujours chaste" (44). Devoid of the counterfeit sexiness of the dancer who knowingly flaunts her sexuality before the audience, Serral's eroticism—like the dance itself—has an authenticity the others lack.

Because Serral performs the *cachucha* in its traditional form as a couple dance, she focusses her attention, not on the audience, but on her partner, Mariano Camprubí: "on la dirait fascinée dans le regard de son cavalier; ses bras se dessinent pâmés d'amour; ... sa taille ploie avec un frisson nerveux, comme si elle se renversait sur le bras d'un amant" (44). She therefore complies with (and informs) Gautier's belief that dance is a "primitive" mating rite in which woman "se défend mollement" against man. Moreover, unlike French dancers, both Serral and Camprubí dance the *cachucha* with the freedom and detachment that express their pure pleasure in their art. According to Gautier, they are not bound by rules, or pecuniary concerns:

Dolorès et Camprubí n'ont aucun rapport avec nos danseuses; c'est une passion, une verve, un entrain dont on n'a pas d'idée, ils n'ont aucunement l'air de danser pour gagner leurs feux, comme les autres, mais pour leur plaisir et leur satisfaction personnelle; il n'y a rien de mécanique, rien d'emprunté et qui sente de l'école, dans leur manière.
(33)²⁷

Gautier's reference to pleasure indicates how "Oriental" Spanish dancing complies with, and symbolises, his doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*: like all pure art, it has no use

²⁷ In acknowledging the skill of Camprubí's dancing, Gautier effectively feminises him; as he puts it earlier in his review, "Le señor Camprubí est aussi agréable à voir danser qu'une femme" (32).

other than to give pleasure, in this instance to the performers as much as the spectators.

The extent to which Gautier sees the Spanish dancer as embodying the principles of *l'art pour l'art* is most apparent in his writing on Petra Cámara. If Romantic art is the expression of freedom, and if pleasure is its *raison d'être*, she is its supreme embodiment; in other words, Cámara reifies Gautier's analogy of sexual freedom and sexual pleasure to aesthetic freedom and aesthetic pleasure. For Gautier, her dancing both initiates, and is tantamount to, sexual arousal and orgasm, and she is the conduit for the mysterious creative force of dance itself. When Cámara performs the dance *El olé gaditano*, for example,

le génie mystérieux de la danse s'empare d'elle; son sein se soulève, sa
narine rose se dilate; un éclair blanc passe entre ses lèvres rouges; ses
yeux, jusque là baignés d'ombre, s'ouvrent et s'illuminent brusquement
laissant échapper d'une seule vague cette flamme et cette clarté si
longtemps contenues. (*LP* May 19, 1851)

Furthermore, Gautier conflates such ecstasy with religious exultation; Cámara is swept away by a kind of cosmic dance of divine harmony:

tout entière à quelque rêve divin, elle oublie le public et ne tient plus à la
terre que par le bout du pied. Elle nous a rappelé, danse ces moments-là,
les derviches tourneurs de Péra, avec leurs yeux blancs, leurs faces
rayonnantes d'effluves et leurs bouches entrouvertes par les béatitudes
du paradis.... [E]lle entre dans le monde pirouettant, vertigineux,
traversé d'ondulations sonores et lumineuses où la danse devient presque
un exercice sacré, une titubation de la chair sous la pression de l'esprit,

un accompagnement involontaire de la ronde des astres, dont la musique platonicienne a été retrouvée par Félicien David. (*Ésd* 266)

But for the modifying “presque,” Gautier would have extended the paradox of chaste voluptuousness to that of a Platonic/Christian transcendence that does not deny the body, but is achieved *through* the body.

As Georges Bataille demonstrates in *L'Érotisme*, there is a powerful connection between spiritual and sexual ecstasy; indeed, sexual union can be seen as emblematic for union with the divine (245-77). Familiar examples in Renaissance—notably baroque—art are Bernini’s sculpture St. Theresa of Avila and John Donne’s poem “Holy Sonnet XIV.” Similarly, Gautier sees the eroticism of Spanish dancing as consonant with worship of the divine, though not sublimated as in Christian art. He writes of the “Romanesque” beauty of Concepción Ruiz, for example, comparing her to the saints in a painting by Zurbarán who “d’une main portent la palme et de l’autre semblent agiter le tambour de basque pour quelque cachucha du paradis” (*LMu* June 4, 1855).²⁸

A paradisaal *cachucha*, like chaste voluptuousness, is not the oxymoron it first seems because Gautier associates authentic eroticism with the divine status of the body, which, in turn, is a trope for “pure” art. David Scott points out that nineteenth-century France saw a major shift in aesthetics from a model informed by Cartesian dualism (in turn, informed by the West’s long philosophical and religious anti-body bias) to one in which “the ‘spiritual’ potential [was seen to be] inherent in the *materiality* of the work” (135, Scott’s emphasis). Delacroix in particular was responsible for this shift, and his ideas, expounded theoretically in his *Journal*, and

²⁸ Guest suggests that the painting was *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, which at the time was hanging in the Spanish Gallery in the Louvre. See Guest, GSD 84.

expressed in his paintings, had a profound influence on many writers, including Gautier. D'Albert, in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, for example, declares that “la matière est le reflect du Divin, comme nous le verrons,” and in reference to female beauty, “J’adore sur toutes chose de la beauté de la forme;—la beauté pour moi, c’est la Divinité visible, c’est le bonheur palpable, c’est le ciel descendu sur la terre” (149). Clearly, D'Albert speaks for Gautier. Accordingly, *La Péri*, the ballet discussed earlier, can be seen as the staging of this aesthetic viewpoint, and the ballerina Grisi/peri as the embodiment of “la Divinité visible.”

Consistent with seeing beauty in material form imbued with the divine, Gautier reveres classical antiquity for its veneration of the body: “Jamais l’hymne du corps humain n’a été chanté en plus nobles strophes, la force superbe de la forme a resplendi d’un éclat incomparable”(qtd. in Hartman *FRP* 167). Renaissance art, too, worships the body, because it shares the same pagan, anthropomorphic tradition, albeit permeated with Catholicism. As Joanna Richardson points out, Gautier rejected Gothic art for its “scorn of the flesh” (*TG* 135), and he greatly admired the works of Correggio, Titian, Veronese, and Rubens for their colour, vigour, and sensuality.²⁹ Similarly, the pleasure of watching Spanish dancers (and their pleasure in performing) challenges and counterbalances the puritanical Protestant tradition Gautier despised.

Like sculpture and painting (and writing), dance, for Gautier, is a medium for displaying female beauty—as I show above, he considers beauty to be a prerequisite in the dancer. Accordingly,

Une femme qui vient à moitié nue, avec une frêle jupe de gaze, un
pantalon collant, se poser devant votre binocle au feu de quatre-vingts

²⁹ See Richardson *TG* 135-136.

quinquets, et qui n'a pas d'autre affaire avec vous que de vous montrer ses épaules, sa poitrine, ses bras et ses jambes dans une suite d'attitudes favorables à leur développement, me semble douée de la plus merveilleuse impudence, si elle n'est pas aussi belle que Phaëne, Aglaure ou Pasithée. (32-3)

There is a circularity here: just as eroticism is verified by female beauty, which, in turn, is authenticated by its precedent in art, so the dancer is authentically erotic *because* she alludes to her precedent in art.

This interconnectedness between the static visual art of painting, the erotic, and beauty in the dancer is also supremely manifest in Petra Cámara, whom Gautier sees as a reflection of Spanish art: her “épais sourcils veloutés, les longs cils jouant comme des papillons noirs, sur le lard de sa joue, rappelaient un des plus admirables portraits de Velásquez” (*LP* August 18, 1851). In turn, art replicates Cámara; Gautier observes that “that head by Velásquez ... encrusted in the ebony locks like dewdrops frozen into the tresses of night, and with eyebrows as black as moleskin ... might be a portrait of Petra Cámara, painted with prophetic foresight” (GSD 59). According to Gautier, Cámara’s beauty and seductive power are of an exceptional kind seen also in the portraits of Velásquez, Zurbarán and de Murillo (*LP* August 18, 1851). It is useful to recall Gautier’s notion that the “truth of art” emerges from the “harmonious lies” of art’s “relative truth.”

If there is a disconcerting sense that, in his comparisons between French and Spanish dancers, Gautier indulges his flair for hyperbole—and a delight in contradiction—rather than giving an accurate account of their art, it is enlightening to refer to Eugène Delacroix’s opinion of Gautier as an art critic. Critical of Gautier’s articles on the “English school” of painters, Delacroix writes:

What he does is take a painting and describe it in his own way; he makes a charming thing of it, but that is not true criticism. So long as he can find words to stimulate his readers, or dazzle them with that interplay of phrase that he so obviously delights in and that often sweeps us along with him, Gautier is satisfied. And provided he can bring allusions to Spain and Turkey, the Alhambra or the Almeida of Constantinople, he feels that he has achieved his aim as an author-connoisseur.³⁰

Of course, Gautier sees himself primarily not as a reviewer, but as a poet whose role is to perceive and create (more to the point, *recreate*) beauty, most especially when it is “Oriental.” As he puts it in a review of Henriette Browne’s painting of a harem in Constantinople, “I could not forbear to think of all the wealth of loveliness thus lost to human sight the marvelous (*sic*) types of Grecian, Circassian, Georgian, and Indian beauty, which fade there, without being reproduced or perpetuated, by the pen or the chisel” (qtd. in Lewis 132). If art gives Gautier visual pleasure, it is pleasure that he wishes his writing to give his readers; in essence, beauty is erotic because it stimulates desire.

Because Gautier sees the artist’s task as that of reproducing or perpetuating beauty as an abstract principle, he does not see either the dancer, or the woman: where the former is subsumed under the latter, she is the raw material of his art. This can be supported, in the first instance, by his focus on the dancer’s movements, less for their intrinsic expressiveness than for their metaphorical value, and, in the second, by his Petrarchan fragmenting of the woman’s body into parts. Nowhere are the processes of eliding the dancer and objectifying the woman more extreme than in

³⁰ See Hubert Wellington, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Lucy Norton (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1980), June 17, 1855, 281.

Gautier's writing in his preferred genre, poetry. A number of his poems, about, or dedicated to, dancers, both "Oriental" and balletic, show that once appropriated and refashioned, the dancer, effectively, no longer exists. Notably, in his poem "A Carlotta," Gautier addresses Carlotta Grisi by eulogising her mouth:

Votre bouche où l'amour en flamme,
 Tout palpitant, vient se poser,
 Est une rose ayant une âme,
 Une fleur qui rend le baiser.

(*Pc* 3: 210)

The poem speaks overwhelmingly of the way in which the poet fetishises a female body part, relating the dancer's beauty to her looks, rather than to her artistry as a performer.

To illustrate this point further, I turn to two other poems that depict dancers: "Oui, Forster, J'admirais ...," which ostensibly eulogises an English ballerina, and "A Gérôme sur son *Almée*," dedicated to the painter Jean-Léon Gérôme for his depiction of an Oriental dancer.³¹ Both poems not only make glaringly obvious Gautier's disregard for the woman and dancer as individuals with agency, they also reveal the indissoluble link in his aesthetic between artistic and sexual freedom. If the erotic dancing woman is a trope for transcendent art that gives pleasure because it is free from bourgeois Puritanism and academic restraint, she is also, in these two poems, the raw material of art that is erotic (pornographic, even) in a literal sense.

"A Gérôme sur son *Almée*" draws its inspiration from Gérôme's Orientalist painting *La Danse de l'Almée* that features a centrally placed, belly-dancing Turkish

³¹ Caroline Forster, an English ballerina who performed at the Paris Opéra from 1834-1844. Gautier wrote this poem in 1840, two years before she created the role of Bathilde in *Giselle*. That he wrote it after dining with Forster tends to confirm that Gautier was inspired by the woman, not the dancer. See Guest's note, *Ésd* 92.

woman performing before a group of men, most of whom are musicians. Where she is depicted with her head lowered and her shadowy face turned away from the viewer's gaze, her arms uplifted, and her breasts exposed but barely discernible, the painting's focal point is unmistakably the expanse of her naked stomach, emphasised by the light that falls directly upon it. Thus, by directing the viewer's gaze to the dancer's belly, Gautier fetishises and personifies her body part, effectively erasing both the woman, and the dancer:

Dans un café plus noir qu'un antre,
 En rang d'oignons sur un bahut,
 Six coquins regardent un ventre
 Qui danse tout seul le chahut.

Avec ce ventre ferme et lisse
 Qu'agite un tordion subtil
 Plus d'un galant sans la police,
 Irait bien trinquer du nombril.

(*Oé n.pag.*)

By fragmenting and objectifying in verse what is already an eroticised representation of the dancer, Gautier doubly effaces her. Moreover, by redirecting the gaze of the six "coquins," he further manipulates the reader's focus onto the dancer's stomach. (In fact, all the men in the painting are either concentrating on their playing, or, if they do look in the dancer's direction, do so with a measure of uninterest, if not boredom.)

At this point, it should be mentioned that "A Gérôme sur son *Almée*" is one of a number of poems that comprise Gautier's small volume entitled *Oeuvres érotiques*,

and which deal with the “forbidden” topics of masturbation and tumescence.³² It is also relevant to note that Baudelaire reports Gautier as having once said,

que l'écrivain qui ne savait pas tout dire, celui qu'une idée si étrange, si subtile qu'on la supposât, si imprévue, tombant comme une pierre de la lune, prenait au dépouvu et sans matériel pour lui donner corps, n'était pas un écrivain. (Ar 159, Baudelaire's emphasis)

Probably Gautier means “tout” in the broadest (and loftiest) sense, but, clearly, he also includes the freedom to say the “unsayable,” since to do so is to scorn bourgeois Puritanism and hypocrisy. It is revealing, then, that Gautier sees the expressiveness of the authentic *cachucha* in terms of erotic verse:

la cachucha est une danse nationale d'un caractère primitif et d'une nudité si naïve qu'elle devient chaste; ... c'est un poème charmant écrit avec des ondulations de hanches, des airs penchés, un pied avancé et retiré, joyeusement scandé par le cliquetis des castagnettes et qui en dit plus à lui seul que bien des volumes de poésies érotiques. (*Ésd* 33)

This image of the body “writing” erotically highlights the way Gautier sees the dancer's art primarily as the somatic form (and symbol) of all art that expresses freedom from repression, sexual as well as artistic.

Although more erotically charged than “A Gérôme,” “Oui, Forster, J'admirais ...” appears, significantly, in Gautier's mainstream collection of poetry. A more finely wrought piece of work (there is a self-reflexivity in its images of highly crafted artefacts), it nonetheless shows the degree to which eroticism is intrinsic to Gautier's aesthetic. As with the above poem, there is nothing at all, apart from the

³² This volume also includes Gautier's “Lettres à la Présidente,” a series of letters he wrote to a female friend that are notable for their erotic and scatological references.

title, to tell us that “Oui, Forster, J’admirais ...” *is* about a dancer. Again, it is a body part—in this instance the dancer’s ear—that expresses her essence as an erotic *objet d’art*. I quote in full:

Oui, Forster, j’admirais ton oreille divine;
 Tu m’avais bien compris, l’éloge se devine:
 Qu’elle est charmante à voir sur les bandeaux moirés
 De tes cheveux anglais si richement dorés!
 Jamais Benvenuto, dieu de la ciselure,
 N’a tracé sur l’argent plus fine niellure,
 Ni dans la danse d’un vase enroulé d’ornement
 D’un tour plus gracieux et d’un goût plus charmant!
 Epanouie au coin de la tempe bleuâtre,
 Elle semble, au milieu de la blancheur d’albâtre,
 Une fleur qui vivrait, une rose de chair,
 Une coquille ôtée à l’écrin de la mer!
 Comme en un marbre grec, elle est droite et petite,
 Et le moule en est pris sur celle d’Aphrodite.
 Bieuheureux le bijou qui de ses lèvres d’or
 Baise son lobe rose, —et plus heureux encor
 Celui qui peut verser, ô faveur sans pareille!
 Dans les contours nacrés de sa conque vermeille,
 Tremblant d’émotion, pâlisant, éperdu,
 Un mot mystérieux, d’elle seule entendu!

(*Pc* 2: 222)

Gazed upon at close quarters, transformed as an artefact, and idolised as a fetish, the ear, transformed into living, or personified objects—“une rose de chair, / Une coquille” or “le moule”—has genital connotations that are enhanced by its “lobe rose.” Because this sexual imagery is juxtaposed with references to Cellini’s metalwork, Greek sculpture, and an allusion to Botticelli’s Neoplatonist painting, *The Birth of Venus*, the poem reveals to a remarkable degree Gautier’s conflation of the sexual with the aesthetic when he writes of a dancer’s beauty. Moreover, because the dancer’s medium is her body and he sees her aesthetic-erotic qualities as the essence of her art, it is irrelevant to which part of the body he directs his writer’s gaze: Forster’s ear is as synecdochic of her status as art as Hermonthis’s foot is of hers.

Forster’s ear as the recipient of “le mot mystérieux” is, similarly, a sexual metaphor; but, in this instance, it is one for the poet’s relationship with the (female) art object as analogous to the actual process of artistic creation. The poet’s intimate, cryptic words of adoration that transform the ear aesthetically pour forth (“verser”) in a torrent (of saying “tout”) that is arguably tantamount to an orgasmic release. That the dancer alone heard the “mot mystérieux,” moreover, does not contradict the fact that to become art, the poem, like the dancer herself, must ultimately be presented in the public arena. This is precisely what Gautier does in producing the poem, even though its creation is as intimate as an implied sexual encounter.

In writing “Oui Forster, J’admirais ...,” Gautier fixes the dancer in time and space in a way that he cannot when she dances: the art of dance is fleeting. Even though female beauty decays, it does so gradually over time; dance movement, however, “dies” at the very moment of its inception. This transience, most certainly,

is anathema to a man who sees concrete art as transcending time: as Gautier puts it in his poem “L’Art,”

Tout passe.—L’art robuste

Seul a l’éternité.

Le buste

Survit à la cité.

(*Pc* 3: 129)

What Gautier reproduces and perpetuates in the written word is the concrete reality of the dancer’s physical beauty. In representing her component parts as artefacts, he can never overlook, or fail to respond to, the fact that she is also a flesh and blood woman. If “la vraie volupté est toujours chaste,” conversely, when transformed as art, the dancer’s chasteness is always imbued with her essential eroticism.

Chapter 2

Gautier, the Dancer, and the Flight to Transcendence

“le rêve de l’amour dans la mort”

The idea that art exists for its own sake flourished in nineteenth-century France because Romantic artists felt alienated from a society whose values were inimical to theirs. Hostile to the prevailing belief in economic and scientific progress, and contemptuous of bourgeois petty morality, they elevated art to a quasi-religious sphere, and glorified themselves as its priests. Indeed, Gautier’s preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*—an acknowledged manifesto for *l’art pour l’art*—is as much an attack on everything he despises about contemporary French society as it is a paean to ideal beauty.

The degree to which Gautier sees himself as alienated from contemporary French society is obvious in the letter that he wrote to Gérard de Nerval in July 1843. De Nerval was in Cairo at the time, and Gautier was prevented from joining him because of his journalistic commitments. His resentment at having to earn a living heightens Gautier’s view of himself as a man caged in by a society that does not value its artists, and who accordingly suffers the anguish of being exiled from his “true” homeland:

On n’est pas toujours du pays qui vous a vu naître, et alors, on cherche à travers tout sa vraie patrie; ceux qui sont faits de la sorte se sentent exilés dans leur ville, étrangers dans leurs foyers, et tourmentés de nostalgies inverses. C’est une bizarre maladie. L’on est comme des oiseaux de passage

encagés. (*Ésd* 134-35)

Gautier develops this image of the poet as a trapped migratory bird in his poem “Ce que disent les Hirondelles.” Here, he writes of swallows gathering in the Parisian autumn as they prepare to migrate; they eulogise their homelands in Athens, Smyrna, Baalbek, Malta, and Cairo, and in the last two stanzas, it becomes clear that these are the poet’s longed-for destinations. “Je comprends tout ce qu’elles disent,” Gautier declares, before describing the poet as a captive bird throwing itself futilely against a cage of social barriers: “Car le poète est un oiseau; / Mais, captif, ses élans se brisent / Contre un invisible réseau!” The poem concludes with the poet’s cry for liberty, his yearning to flee the “winter” of a philistine society blind to true beauty.¹

Des ailes! des ailes! des ailes!

Comme dans le chant de Ruckert,

Pour voler, là-bas avec elles

Au soleil d’or, au printemps vert! (*Pc* 3: 95)

In a sense, Gautier *was* migratory; he regularly escaped Paris to travel abroad. He made three trips to Spain in all, in 1840, 1846, and 1864 respectively; he visited Algeria in 1845, Belgium and Holland in 1846, and Holland again in 1849. Italy was his destination in 1850 and 1868, and three years later, he visited Athens, Constantinople, and Malta. Between 1854 and 1868, he revisited Belgium, travelled to Switzerland and Germany, and made three journeys to Russia.² In 1869, Gautier visited Egypt (as an

¹ Gautier’s imagery in “Ce que disent les Hirondelles” prefigures Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cygne,” where, as a symbol for art, and for the poet himself, the exiled swan drags its earthbound wings through the sterile dust of Paris, a city under reconstruction to the plans of Baron Haussmann. See Baudelaire 82-3.

² The books that Gautier wrote about his travels are so rich in their descriptions of exotic cultures that, in themselves, they can be regarded as also providing the writer (and the reader) with escape. These include

official guest at the opening of the Suez canal). He also on occasion crossed the Channel to visit London's galleries and theatres, and to see his favourite dancers perform.³

As Émile Zola was to observe later, French Romantic writers escaped from the society they detested not only by travelling to foreign countries, but also by withdrawing into the exotic and past realms of their imaginations. In his words,

Tous les écrivains de l'école [romantique] sont caractérisés par [une] haine de l'âge actuel; tous protestent et, ne pouvant rien changer aux choses, s'échappent dans l'histoire des siècles morts ou dans les voyages aux pays étrangers.⁴

This is certainly true of Gautier: most of his prose works in the fantastic genre, and all his ballet scenarios, are either set in, or feature, dream-like journeys to exotic locations of the past.⁵ (The centrality of “living” dead, or mummified, women in a number of these works adds another dimension to the notion of “siècles morts.”) Moreover, as his response to a troupe of Spanish dancers performing at the Théâtre des Variétés confirms, Gautier also “escapes” by rejecting his national identity:

Voyage en Espagne (1843), *Voyage pittoresque en Algérie* (1845), *Italia* (1852), *Constantinople* (1853), and *Voyage en Russie* (1867).

³ Dancers from the Paris Opéra regularly performed at Her Majesty's Theatre, London, the most famous occasion being in the 1845 season when Fanny Cerrito, Carlotta Grisi, Lucille Grahn and Marie Taglioni all performed together in the famous *Pas de Quatre*.

⁴ Freud believed that all artists actually desire wealth, honour, power and fame, yet because they often lack the means to achieve them, they turn away from reality and transfer their interests and libido to the wishful constructions of their fantasy world. See Freud, 1917, vol. 16, 376.

⁵ Ancient Egypt is the setting for the novellas *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* and *Le Roman de la momie*, and the narrator's dream-like destination in his short story “Le Pied de momie;” the nineteenth-century hero of “Arria Marcella” visits the ancient ruins of Pompeii, only to be transported back nearly two thousand years to the then thriving city. Of the ballets, *Giselle* is set in Silesia, *La Péri* in Cairo, *Gemma* in Naples, *Yanko le Bandit* in Hungary, *Pâquerette* in Flanders and Hungary, and *Sacountalâ* in India. For the sources of Gautier's scenarios see Edward Binney 3rd, *Les Ballets de Théophile Gautier* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1965).

toutes les fois que nous entendons bourdonner la guitare et babiller les
castagnettes, éprouvons-nous un plaisir mêlé d'attendrissement et de
mélancolie, car les plus beaux jours de notre vie se sont passés à l'Alhambra,
et, l'endroit où l'on a été heureux n'est-il pas comme une patrie de l'âme?
(*LP* January 19, 1846)

Referring here to his first visit to Spain with his friend Eugène Piot five years earlier, Gautier affirms his conviction that an artist's spiritual attachment transcends all national boundaries.⁶

By implication, Gautier's allegiance is not to his country of birth; it is significant, therefore, that the Spanish dancers not only induce his nostalgia, but also express the essence of the place where he enjoys spiritual freedom, and by which he differentiates himself as other. In fact, Spanish dancers were often billed as *gitanos*, a term whose French equivalent—*bohèmes*—was used to differentiate artists and writers from mainstream nineteenth-century French society.⁷ It is relevant to note, therefore, that in his review of Dennery and Grangé's play *Les Bohémiens de Paris*, Gautier takes umbrage at the playwrights' use of the term *bohémien* to identify the "grinches, ... escarpes, ... [les] affreux scélérats" and the "hideux crapauds" that inhabit Paris.⁸ According to Gautier, "les véritables bohémiens" (and, by implication, poets) observe no national boundaries as they belong to an ancient caste whose origins are lost in "la nuit des temps" (*Had* 3: 106).

⁶ Gautier records, in *Voyage en Espagne*, that he and Piot spent four nights at the Alhambra, sleeping on mattresses in the Hall of the Two Sisters and in the Hall of the Abencerrages.

⁷ Marilyn Brown argues that because nineteenth-century Romantic artists were, in fact, from middle-class backgrounds, their representation of themselves as bohemians was a self-deluding myth. See Marilyn Brown, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985).

⁸ *Les Bohémiens de Paris* was a dramatised version of Eugène Sue's novel *Les Mystères de Paris*.

Although he admits that the gypsies he had seen in Granada practised “toutes sortes d’industries suspectes et diaboliques,” they are far from the lowly species of Parisian criminal depicted in the play. Rather, they display “l’orgueil d’une race pure et sans mélange,” and personify “l’antique et mystérieuse mélancolie de l’Orient” (106).

Furthermore, if these *bohémiens* “ont leur hiérarchie, leur religion, leurs rites” and “un intérêt poétique se rattache à leurs migrations,” they not only inspire poetry, but are the *confrères* of those who create it. In Gautier’s words:

Il est aussi une autre espèce de bohémiens non moins charmants, non moins poétiques; c’est cette jeunesse folle qui vit de son intelligence un peu au hasard et au jour le jour: peintres, musiciens, acteurs, poètes [*sic*], journalistes, qui aime mieux le plaisir que l’argent[.] ... Avec les gitanos d’Espagne, les gypsies d’Écosse, les zigueurs [*sic*] d’Allemagne, voilà les seuls bohémiens que nous reconnaissons. (106-7)

Clearly, Gautier idealises the gypsy in order to assert his otherness as an artist in an antagonistic French society. In his letter to de Nerval, he even more pointedly proclaims both himself and his fellow *bohémiens* as not French, and, in some instances, authenticates their role of artist by affiliating them to a past historical period:

Si l’on voulait, il serait facile d’assigner à chaque célébrité d’aujourd’hui non seulement le pays, mais le siècle où aurait dû se passer son existence véritable: Lamartine et de Vigny sont anglais modernes; Hugo est espagnol-flamand du temps de Charles Quint; Alfred de Musset, napolitain du temps de la domination espagnole; Decamps, turc asiatique; Marilhat arabe; Delacroix

marocain ... Toi, tu es allemand; moi, je suis Turc, non de Constantinople,
mais d’Egypte. (*Ésd* 135)

Elaborating on his own self-perceived identity, Gautier remarks “Il me semble que j’ai vécu en Orient; et lorsque pendant le carnaval je me déguise avec quelque caftan et quelque tarbouche authentique, je crois reprendre mes vrais habits” (*Ésd* 135).

Gautier’s wish to escape, his self-representation as a “Turk,” and his idea that happiness defines the soul’s *patrie*, are particularly revealing in the light of twentieth-century cultural and post-Freudian theories, especially when his view of the “Oriental” dancer is taken into account. According to Edward Said, the West has long defined itself—most especially during the period of nineteenth-century imperialist expansionism—by constructing the Orient as its opposite. To a view of itself as civilised, rational, progressive and masculine, the West opposes the East as primitive and non-progressive, sensual, mysterious and feminine. This “orientalising” process Said sees as the means by which the West reinforces its self-image as culturally superior, thereby justifying its colonising role.

John McKenzie argues, as do a number of other critics, that Said’s thesis is too monolithic because many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century individuals held the Orient in high esteem and, in fact, considered it to hold superior values to the West.⁹ This is also true of many French Romantics, of whom Gautier is an example. Nonetheless, in relation

⁹ Joanna de Groot, for example, sees orientalism as symptomatic of a nineteenth-century crisis of gender. She suggests that for the nineteenth-century male, the East offered alternative models of identity. Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* was first published in 1978, but he widens his concerns in his later work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). See Joanna De Groot, “‘Sex’ and ‘Race’: The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century,” *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendell (London: Routledge, 1989).

to his aesthetic as a whole and to the dancer in particular, Gautier's representation of the "Oriental" is ambiguous. On the one hand, Gautier's image of gypsies as noble, mysterious, melancholic and diabolic can be cited as evidence for Said's hypothesis, as can the way he appropriates the "feminine" and the "Oriental" in order to reinforce his identity as the (Western) Romantic artist-subject. On the other hand, Gautier's anti-bourgeois position does not fit neatly with an orientalism that bolsters the status quo; as I show in Chapter 1, he sees the otherness of the "Oriental" dancer as highlighting, not the French ballerina's superiority, but her *deficiencies*. For Gautier, the more spontaneous, less technically polished performances of Spanish dancers are nearly always preferable to the dry academicism of the *figurante*. Accordingly, Gautier's notion of transcendent art can be seen not just as an escape *from* the restraints and oppression of a patriarchal contemporary French society, but more specifically as a flight *into* the realm of the "feminine" Oriental Other.

Gautier's identification with the "Orient"—his "disguise" as a Turk—can be also be seen as his alignment with popular taste and a flight into the "feminine" domain of "low" culture, or, in Bakhtinian terms, with a "carnavalesque" disruption of social and artistic hierarchies.¹⁰ Importantly, the various Spanish dancers who visited Paris during the years Gautier worked as a reviewer almost never performed on the Paris Opéra stage,

¹⁰ In his study of François Rabelais, Bakhtin argues that the carnival was a period of social disruption during which the authority of church and state were lampooned, and subverted. When ordinary people celebrated their release from normal work by indulging in bodily pleasure—eating, drinking and sexual promiscuity—their behaviour was an affront to polite society and reversed the normal balance of power. Bakhtin argues that Rabelais adopted this, a social mode, as a form of literary satire. See "Carnaval" in Peter Brooker, *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory* (London: Arnold, 1999) 23. It is worth noting that Gautier held Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel* in high esteem.

but as entertainment during the carnival balls held there.¹¹ In a real sense, then, such dancing was carnivalesque. Moreover, because they performed at floor level, the boundary between the Spanish dancers, and their audience was less defined, and although they were professional performers, in essence, their dancing remained true to its vernacular roots. (Indeed, Gautier comments that the classicists regarded Spanish dance as “la danse de carrefour et de bohème,” and its non-bourgeois status is signalled by costumes sparkling sequins “reléguées depuis longtemps sur les jupes des saltimbanques de carrefour” [*Had* 1: 282]).¹² That the Spanish dancers also performed in the boulevard theatres—venues for melodrama—highlights their otherness as an aspect of “low” popular culture.

As Andreas Huyssen argues in his essay “Mass Culture as Woman,” modernism polarised high art and mass culture in gender terms, the former as the privileged realm of the masculine, the latter as the inferior domain of the feminine.¹³ He also points out that, despite their claims for élite art, a number of nineteenth-century writers identified with the feminine because of “the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress—with the

¹¹ On two occasions Spanish dancers did grace the Paris Opéra stage: Josefa Soto appeared in 1847, and Rosa Espert and Joaquina Segura in 1851. This supports the view that Spanish dancers were seen by the Opéra management as providing popular entertainment inappropriate for the Opéra audiences. Their main venues were the commercial theatres such as the Variétés, the Gymnase, the Palais Royal and the Vaudeville. See Ivor Guest’s introduction, “Gautier on Spanish Dancing,” *Dance Chronicle* 10.1 (1987) 9.

¹² It is interesting to note that Deidre Priddin sees Gautier’s costume preferences as reflecting his “romantic tendencies: his anti-realism, his artificiality, his taste for the voluptuous and for luxury, his exoticism and his love of light and colour” (Priddin 47). She sees this as evidence of his “decadent” strain, because tinsel and sequins are associated with lower forms of entertainment. See Deidre Priddin, *The Art of Dance in French Literature* (London: A. and C. Black, 1952) 47.

¹³ See Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approach to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana UP, c1986) 188-207.

realms of business, industry, science, and law” (Huyssen 189). The prime example is Flaubert, who declares “Madame Bovary, c’est moi.”¹⁴ Indeed, where the *danseuse* is antithetical to masculine “action, enterprise, and progress,” Gautier prefigures Flaubert’s absolute identification with the feminine. For example, he describes Fanny Elssler in the lead role in *La Gypsy* in terms that recall his own yearning for flight: she is “une vive et folle hirondelle” (*Ésd* 88). Furthermore, at one point in the ballet, the “bohémienne” Elssler “s’ennuie dans la cage du salon” (89). Gautier identifies even more closely with the feminine where he writes about Marie Taglioni, positing a kind of union that is the catalyst for releasing his own (feminine) creative powers: “Admirer un grand artiste, c’est incarner avec lui, entrer dans le secret de son âme; c’est le comprendre, et comprendre c’est presque créer” (*Ésd* 161).

By suggesting that to admire a great artist, and hence understand the essence of her art by merging physically and spiritually with her, is almost the act of creation itself, Gautier implies that both art and creativity are feminine *per se*. Unlike Flaubert, however, he never claims that he actually *is* any of the women he creates in his fiction or ballets. Indeed, as can be construed from one of his most quoted (and ambiguous) remarks —“I am a man for whom the visible world exists” (qtd. in Richardson 152)—Gautier is the centre of his own subjective universe, and as such, enjoys the vantage point of the poet and Petrarchan lover. Accordingly, if the dominant concern in much of Gautier’s writing is the Romantic subject’s yearning for union with the transcendently beautiful and exotic dancer, she embodies the Other, who remains tantalisingly unattainable.

¹⁴ *Madame Bovary* was first published in 1856, thirteen years after Gautier’s letter to Gérard de Nerval.

It is important to recall that in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Gautier writes “la jouissance me paraît le but de la vie” (46), and to note that there is a sexual dimension to *jouissance* that tends to be lost when the term is translated into English as simply “enjoyment.” In the eighteenth-century *L’Encyclopédie* (with which, given the avidity of his reading, Gautier was likely to have been familiar), Denis Diderot defines “Jouissance” as “jouir, c’est connoître, éprouver, sentir les avantages de posséder.” And, should the sexual implications of this definition be overlooked, Diderot goes on to say that “La propagation des êtres est le plus grand objet de la nature” (889), and that it is in the enjoyment of another human being that “man” discovers the most noble of passions, and his imagination is inflamed:

le coeur palpite; les membres tréssaillent; des images voluptueuses errent dans le cerveau; des torrents d’esprits coulent dans les nerfs, les irritent, & vont le rendre au siège d’un nouveau sens qui se déclare & qui tourmente. La vûe se trouble, le délire naît; la raison esclave de l’instinct se borne à le fervir, & la nature est satisfaite. (889)

Diderot’s Humean view that reason is a slave to the passions is consistent with Romanticism’s overturning of the Enlightenment hierarchy, and it provides a model for Gautier’s view of dancers whose “images voluptueuses” inflame the imagination and offer an ecstatic escape from the masculine, rationalistic status quo. It is interesting also to consider the significance of *jouissance* in Julia Kristeva’s post-Freudian theory regarding what she sees as the non-autonomous or permanently unstable subject. According to Kristeva, the individual is never able to separate himself (or herself) entirely from the external world; as a result, subjectivity is never complete, and its

conflicts and ambiguities remain always unresolved. It is this incompleteness, or continuing irresolution marked by the lack of a clear distinction between subject and object, that offers a subversion of, and freedom from, the dominance of the masculine. Kristeva posits the notion of *jouissance* as exemplifying this release from the masculine as the desired and blissful state that belongs to the pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic (or pre-verbal) “semiotic” realm located in woman and the body.¹⁵ When seen through the filter of Kristeva’s theory—and as Gautier sees her—the erotic dancer does indeed inhabit a realm of ambiguous and indistinct subjectivity that exists beyond language, thereby challenging established hierarchies and promising a pleasurable dissolution of the self.

Put more simply, the dancer’s milieu resembles, and corresponds to, the uncontrollable play of the unconscious. Dance is, after all, a mute art. In Gautier’s words:

Rien ne ressemble plus à un rêve qu’un ballet, et c’est ce qui explique le plaisir singulier qu’on prend à ces sortes de représentations en apparence frivoles. On jouit, éveillé, des phénomènes que la fantaisie nocturne trace sur la toile du sommeil: tout un monde chimérique se meut devant vous. (*Ésd* 222)

According to Kristeva, however, this dream world—*jouissance*—is as dangerous as it is exciting; to use her terminology, it is also the site of ultimate abjection wherein the

¹⁵ Lacan considered that the subject’s entry into the symbolic order (the realm of language) is at the cost of the sense of completeness that he/she experienced in the realm of the imaginary, the pre-verbal idyllic state of oneness, or non-differentiation from the mother. He suggested that the subject eternally experiences a sense of lack that fuels the continual longing, or *desire* for self-completion. For a concise exposition of Lacan’s theories see Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin, 2000) 38-50.

subject is faced with the horror of death and the corpse.¹⁶ This is the reading that Jody Bruner gives the wilis in *Giselle*; indeed, where Gautier depicts dancers as possessing an erotic power that is the “eternal” essence of woman and art, and where they embody the ambiguous status of *vivante-morte*, they partly represent what the subject thrusts away in horror as he attempts to shore up subjectivity. When Gautier’s dancers tantalise the desiring subject with the promise of ultimate escape from reality, they represent death whose horror is transmuted—and mitigated—as an erotic and aesthetic event. In this, his aesthetic prefigures the *thanatos-eros* duality typical of Wagnerian Romanticism and which later became a defining aspect of French Symbolism and *fin-de-siècle* Decadence.

Whether seen in terms of Kristeva’s theory or according to the Petrarchan Neoplatonist tradition, desire for union with the beloved has profound consequences for the artist because it dissolves the boundaries of subjectivity. To desire the possession of, or merging with ideal beauty, paradoxically, is an assertion of the subject’s differentiation from her. This is illustrated dramatically in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s drama *Pygmalion*. Consistent with its mythical precedent, *Pygmalion* features the opposing desires of the spectatorial (and creative) subject towards the beloved woman-as-art-object: Pygmalion is erotically drawn to Galatea and wishes to animate her with his own soul, even to die, so that he may “live” in her. Yet he knows that “if I were she, I would not see her, I would not be the one who loves her,” and prays that he will “forever be another, in order always to want to be her, to see her, to love her, to be loved by her.”¹⁷ Here, as Irving

¹⁶ Mansfield sums up the Kristevan view of the corpse as “life and death, presence and absence, love and repulsion, happiness and dismay in an endless, chaotic alternation and confusion” (Mansfield 84).

¹⁷ Qtd. in Singer 297. It is interesting to note that the Romantic ballet *La Fille de marbre* (1847) was also based on the Greek myth. In the light of Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*’s comments, Gautier’s review makes revealing reading. See *Ésd* 204-5.

Singer points out, Rousseau exposes the insoluble problem of Neoplatonic desire.

Likewise, Kristeva posits *jouissance* as a state desired but dangerous, because of the threat it poses to an already unstable subjectivity. It is relevant that Gautier's life-long passion for Carlotta Grisi probably was never consummated; true to Petrarchan and Romantic convention, the idealised woman remained ever unattainable, and desire was never to be sated by fulfilment.¹⁸ This is not the least part of the dancer's appeal: on the stage, simultaneously real and fantastical, she provokes desire and offers the tantalising promise of union, but the curtain ultimately falls and she disappears from view. The spectator effectively awakens, but his dream is intact.

When Gautier idealises Carlotta Grisi, he blurs the distinctions between the flesh and blood woman and her role as Giselle: to his own question "Qu'est-ce que Giselle?" Gautier replies "Giselle, c'est Carlotta Grisi" (*Ésd* 118). He also states that "le nom de Carlotta est devenu inséparable de celui de *Giselle*" (*Souv* 110, Gautier's italics).¹⁹ And, as I show later, Gautier recreates Grisi/Giselle as the fictional, supernatural Spirite, thus blurring still further the distinctions between the woman and the dancer, reality and fantasy. Despite their apparent separation by the boundary of the footlights—"la ligne de feu" (*LP* March 28, 1854)—Gautier sees the material world and the stage world of dreams as interpenetrating; because of her ambiguous status as both erotic woman and art, the dancer drifts between the two.

¹⁸ Carlotta formed a relationship with the dancer Jules Perrot, and Gautier married her sister, the singer Ernesta. It is generally considered that Gautier's relationship with Carlotta was never more than friendship.

¹⁹ Qtd. in McCarren *DP* 60.

To demonstrate how Gautier's concept of *l'art pour l'art* is thus an aesthetic of escape, the multi-layered meaning of escape, and how it is implicated in the artist's relationship to the dancer-as-art, I now turn to Gautier's creative writing. As a metaphor for *l'art pour l'art*, one of his most interesting works is the novella *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre*. Set in ancient Egypt, *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* tells of the beautiful young man Meïamoun's obsession with the legendary woman of the title, and his ultimate death at her hand. Importantly—if predictably—his death is the climax to the story, and is preceded by Cléopâtre's seductive dance.²⁰

On the most obvious level, *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* reveals the writer's wish to escape from daily life: Gautier journeys imaginatively to ancient Egypt, an exotic, pagan world that is the antithesis of contemporary, bourgeois France. Indeed, the grandeur of the setting is more a construct of Gautier's imagination than an historical reality.²¹ In the story's opening, for example, Cléopâtre cruises down the Nile against an ever-changing backdrop of monuments and palaces that Gautier sums up as “toutes les prodigiosités de ... [l'] architecture de Titans” (6), and later in the story he describes her banqueting hall as remarkable for its “monstrueuses colonnes[,] ... chapiteaux ventrus de gigantesques arcades” and “sphinx colossal[s].” It is so vast that “l'oeil ne pouvait en pénétrer le profondeur incommensurable” (38). Should the importance of this architectural splendour be lost on the reader, Gautier interrupts the narrative to explain at length:

²⁰ As Mario Praz points out, Cléopâtre is the precursor of Hérodiade, the deadly woman-who-dances who was to obsess writers (and artists) later in the century. See Mario Praz, *Romantic Agony*, 2nd edition (London; OUP) 215-16.

²¹ In fact, because of his prodigious reading, Gautier was thoroughly familiar with Egyptian art.

Notre monde est bien petit à côté du monde antique, nos fêtes sont mesquines auprès des effrayantes somptuosités des patriciens romains et des princes asiatiques.... Nous avons peine à concevoir, avec nos habitudes misérables, ces existences énormes, réalisant tout ce que l'imagination peut inventer de hardi, d'étrange et de plus monstrueusement en dehors du possible.... Les soleils radieux qui brillaient sur la terre sont à tout jamais éteints dans le néant de l'uniformité; il ne se lève plus sur la noire fourmilière des hommes de ces colosses à formès de Titan qui parcouraient le monde en trois pas, comme les chevaux d'Homère; —plus de tour de Lylacq, plus de Babel géante escaladant le ciel de ses spirales infinies, plus de temples démesurés faits avec des quartiers de montagne, de terrasses royales ...; plus de ces villes désordonnées faites d'un inextricable entassement d'édifices cyclopéens.... Hélas! plus rien que des ruches de plâtre sur un damier de pavés. (36-7)

Gautier's viewpoint here is uncomfortably close to an apology for the excesses of the *ancien régime*, and for the élitism inherent in *l'art pour l'art*, an élitism that many critics consider led directly to some twentieth-century modernist writers' flirtation with fascism. Of relevance here, though, is the importance Gautier gives to creativity and the unconscious. "L'on s'étonne que les hommes ne se soient pas révoltés contre ces confiscations de toutes les riches et de toutes les forces vivantes au profit de quelques rares privilégiés," he admits; but he then contends that men did not revolt because "ces existences prodigieuses étaient la réalisation au soleil du rêve que chacun faisait la nuit" (37). Accordingly, it is the privileged few who aggrandise their lives by art (or, put

another way, stage their lives *as art*). They both express, and are objects of, the innate, universal desire for beauty.

Gautier sees ideal beauty as art personified in woman and Cléopâtre as her superlative form. As he puts it in a *feuilleton* published in *La Presse* (1847):

Cléopâtre est peut-être le type féminin du plus haut titre qui se soit produit dans l'histoire. Beauté, gloire, puissance, elle réunit tout. Elle est la vérité de l'idéal, et jamais les imaginations du rêveur le plus effréné ne sauront aller au-delà.... Cléopâtre joignait les séductions de son sexe portées à un degré inouï, personne ne fut plus reine, et personne ne fut plus femme.²² (Qtd. in Boschot xii)

Both artefact and seductive woman, Cléopâtre personifies all that is feminine, eternal, powerful and transcendent; as such, she is Gautier's paradigmatic dancer. Indeed, idealised as art in its multiple forms, like her real counterparts, she has "un divin petit pied" (32), "un nez sévère et droit, en façon de camée" (31) and "de marbre" (32), her back is "poli et lustré" (33). Where these qualities suggest the stasis of lithograph, ornament and sculpture, they co-exist with "une volupté effrénée, une ardeur de vie incroyable [que] rayonnait dans le rouge éclat et dans le lustre humide de la lèvre inférieure" (31) that foretell the qualities of the Spanish dancers Gautier later admired. Moreover, her status as dancer highlights her ambiguity as the agent who instigates art (the dancer who dances), and the work of art (the dancer who is seen). This is shown at the beginning of chapter 2 when, at length, Cléopâtre complains to her maid Charmion of

²² *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* was first published, in *feuilleton* form, in November and December 1838, nine years before the article in *La Presse*. This shows how lasting as an aesthetic symbol Cléopâtre was for Gautier.

her melancholy and boredom, and of all that she finds oppressive and moribund about Egypt (10-13). She suffers, she tells Charmion, because without an adoring subject to validate her status as woman and art, she is more artefact than woman; her melancholy could be alleviated only if she were loved and had “quelque passion au coeur” (13). Thus she embodies the paradox of Gautier’s ideal of art that is detached from day-to-day reality, but whose form and expression are essentially earthly and erotic. (This paradox is highlighted with reference to Gautier’s review of the ballet *La Fille de marbre*, where he writes of the moment when the marble statue of Fatma-Galathea comes to life. As he rhetorically puts it, “Que peut faire une statue devenue femme? aimer” [*sic*, *Ésd* 205]).

The relationship between the viewer and the viewed is reciprocal: just as the perceiver desires her (it), so the pure art work “desires” the adoration of her (its) perceiver. On the one hand, Cléopâtre is objectified, idealised beauty that is cold, dispassionate, and remote, and, on the other, she is the passionate, erotic woman who inflames men’s desire. Cléopâtre speaks for Gautier when she states that

Une reine, c’est quelque chose de si loin des hommes, de si élevé, de si séparé, de si impossible! ... Ce n’est plus une femme, c’est une figure auguste et sacrée qui n’a point de sexe, et que l’on adore à genoux sans l’aimer, comme la statue d’une déesse.... [Q]uel amant des beautés divines a pris des ailes pour voler vers les palais d’or du ciel? Le respect et la terreur glacent les âmes en notre présence, et pour être aimée de nos pareils il faudrait descendre dans le nécropoles. (13-14)

Cléopâtre’s *ennui* is relieved, however, by the arrival of the adoring Meïamoun. Excited at being the focus of his desire—he has been covertly gazing upon her for some

time—she promises him one night of bliss on condition that he sacrifice his life. In Gautier's words: "il fallait que toutes les joies possibles d'une existence humaine fussent concentrées en quelques heures" (38). The climax of all possible joy is Cléopâtre's dancing: curvilinear, sensual and ecstatic and skimming the ground as if performed *en pointe*, it is at once "Oriental" (like Cámara's), and ethereal (like Taglioni's). As a dancer, Cléopâtre is the ultimate synthesis of art and woman:

Ses beaux bras arrondis comme les anses d'un vase de marbre secouaient au-dessus de sa tête des grappes de notes étincelantes, et ses crotales babillaient avec une volubilité toujours croissante. Debout sur la pointe vermeille de ses petits pieds, elle avançait rapidement et venait effleurer d'un baiser le front de Meïamoun, puis elle recommençait son manège et voltigeait autour de lui, tantôt se cambrant en arrière, la tête renversée, l'oeil demi-clos, les bras pâmés et morts, les cheveux débouclés et pendants comme une bacchante du mont Ménale agitée par son dieu; tantôt leste, vive, rieuse, papillonnante, indefatigable et plus capricieuse en ses méandres que l'abeille qui butine. (42)

Cléopâtre expresses what for Gautier is the erotic essence of art; he concludes his description of her dance by saying that "L'amour du coeur, la volupté des sens, la passion ardente, la jeunesse inépuisable et fraîche, la promesse du bonheur prochain, elle exprimait tout" (42).

Cléopâtre's dance prepares Meïamoun for his ecstatic death by provoking desire and providing pleasure that increasingly dissociates him from reality; we are told earlier that

Cléopâtre voulait éblouir sa victime volontaire, et la plonger dans un tourbillon de voluptés vertigineuses, l'enivrer, l'étourdir avec le vin de l'orgie, pour que la mort, bien qu'acceptée, arrivât sans être vue ni comprise. (38)

Although there is no explicit reference in the story to a sexual liaison between Cléopâtre and Meïamoun, the conventional play on orgasm-death—*la petite mort*—is obvious. Here, though, having achieved his life's goal, Meïamoun has nothing left to desire, and "death" is the "real" climax:

Une joie grave et profonde brillait dans tous ses traits; il avait embrassé sa chimère aux ailes inquiètes sans qu'elle s'envolât; il avait touché le but de sa vie.... Il a obtenu tellement au delà de ses plus folles espérances que le monde n'a plus rien à lui donner. (40)

A metaphor for the role of art, Cléopâtre's erotic dancing initiates the dissolving of the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious self. Meïamoun's ecstatic "death," therefore, is an "escape" or surrender to art, and by art, into the indeterminate time and space of the "feminine" world of the imagination, or, as seen from a Kristevan perspective, into the pre-Oedipal, pre-verbal state of bliss. Cléopâtre has a languor and sensuality that are antithetical to Western patriarchal notions of leadership, and is thus an emblem for a feminine world that is ambiguous and variable, and, accordingly, is associated with water, night and sleep.²³ It is hardly coincidental that Meïamoun enters

²³ Gautier was conversant with Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. It seems likely, therefore, that the play provided a reflection of, if not a precedent for, Gautier's representation of Cléopâtre as the embodiment of the erotic, mysterious, and "feminine" East. This is certainly Adolphe Boschot's view; he comments, "l'oeuvre de Shakespeare, lue et relue comme un bréviaire, vivait dans son coeur." See his introduction, *Le Roman de la momie* (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1963) ix.

Cléopâtre's domain by water and by penetration—he swims up the Nile, and through the subterranean channels to her private baths—and his orgiastic escape into the feminine “universal dream” is initiated by nocturnal revelries. That the unfolding, and culmination of the narrative in *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* is couched in sexual terms also shows how Gautier equates aesthetic escape with sexual climax, and reveals the full significance of dancing, erotic woman as a symbol for art that essentially gives pleasure.

Une Nuit de Cléopâtre can be seen as a dream sequence in which the hero escapes reality by an orgasmic release induced by a seductive, dancing woman. There is a similar outcome in “La Cafetière,” the first of Gautier's stories in the fantastic genre. Like *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre*, this story features the dancing woman as a central figure, and, similarly, can be read as a metaphor of escape through art from the bonds of self-consciousness. Here, though, the narrator Théodore actually dreams of dancing with (as opposed to merely observing) a woman of idealised beauty. While passing the night in a chateau in Normandy, Théodore dreams that a coffee pot, furniture, portraits, and a group of figures on a tapestry all come to life. He watches, both terrified and amused, as the chairs move across the room and the figures sit, converse, and drink coffee from cups that also have lives of their own. At the stroke of midnight, the figures begin to dance, and Théodore then notices a beautiful young woman sitting alone whose name he later learns is Angéla. He is magnetically drawn to her, and, as he engages her in conversation, he experiences an overwhelming compulsion to dance. They take the floor in an intoxicating and ever-accelerating waltz that ends in her collapse. But if thus, *within* the dream, Théodore experiences a further loss of autonomy, it is of short duration; he awakens to find in his hand a fragment of the coffee pot bearing Angéla's resemblance. Only then

does Théodore discover that Angéla is, in fact, his host's sister, and that she had died two years earlier of the pneumonia she had caught at a ball.²⁴

In an obvious way, Théodore escapes from the bourgeois present simply because he *does* dream; it is while dreaming that normal concepts of time become irrelevant and the past and the present dissolve into each other. But, in a sense, this dissolution occurs even before he falls asleep. When Théodore recalls that, on entering the bedchamber, the past was for him so palpable that “l'on aurait pu se croire au temps de la Régence” (56), he experiences an ambiguous realm where the past intrudes upon the present, and dream overlaps reality. Put another way, Théodore enters a domain in which his unconscious is liberated from the bonds of consciousness. Significantly, it is there that the boundaries of life and death also dissolve, and Théodore discovers his ideal of beauty, the *vivante-morte* whose “immortalised” seductive appeal transcends time and place.

That Angéla is Théodore's ideal is confirmed when he remarks,

Jamais, même en rêve, rien d'aussi parfait ne s'était présenté à mes yeux; une peau d'une blancheur éblouissante, des cheveux d'un blond cendré, de longs cils et des prunelles bleues, si claires et si transparentes, que je voyais son âme à travers aussi distinctement qu'un caillou au fond d'un ruisseau.

Et je sentis que, si jamais il m'arrivait d'aimer quelqu'un, ce serait elle.

(59-60)

²⁴ As Peter Whyte demonstrates, Gautier greatly admired, and was influenced by, the fantastic stories of E.T.A. Hoffman. Whyte suggests that both the narrator's name, and the dead woman's, are borrowed from Hoffman's own stories. Théodore is the hero's name in Hoffman's *Frères Sérapion* and Angéla is the heroine in both *Bonheur au jeu*, and *La Cour d'Artus*. Theodor is also Hoffman's second name. Whyte also suggests that in writing “La Cafetière” Gautier was influenced by Walter Scott's *La Chambre tapissée*, and by Washington Irving's *L'Aventure de mon oncle*. See Peter Whyte, *Théophile Gautier: Conteur fantastique et merveilleux* (Durham: U of Durham, 1996) 12-114.

So destabilised is his temporal and spatial awareness, that, in recalling this moment, Théodore forgets that he had seen Angéla in a dream. (In this way, the narration, itself a recollection of events, also dissolves the boundaries between reality and the creative imagination.) Indeed, when Théodore describes the exhilaration he felt whilst gazing upon Angéla, his “sens ... absorbés dans la contemplation de cette mystérieuse et fantastique créature, ” he says,

Je n'avais plus aucune idée de l'heure ni du lieu; le monde réel n'existait plus pour moi, et tous les liens qui m'y attachent étaient rompus; mon âme, dégagée de sa prison de boue, nageait dans le vague et l'infini; ... les pensées d'Angéla se révélant à moi sans qu'elle eût besoin de parler; car son âme brillait dans son corps comme une lampe d'albâtre, et les rayons parties de sa poitrine perçaient la mienne de part en part. (61-2)

This transcendent experience of merging with the beloved object occurs, significantly, after Théodore has danced with Angéla. Until he sees her, Théodore is the relatively detached and distanced observer who, from his bed, watches as the tapestry figures dance: they “sautaient, cabriolaient, faisaient des ronds de jambe, des jetés battus et des entrechats de trois pieds de haut” (59). It is only when Angéla partners him in a waltz that the boundaries between dream and reality, past and present, and life and death disintegrate.

It is notable that the waltz is a development of the rumbustious German peasant dance, the *ländler*, and thus is non-bourgeois in origin, as well as anti-bourgeois in impulse. Moreover, Ruth Katz considers that the waltz expresses not only the Romantic spirit in art—creativity severed from the rules to which it was hitherto bound—but also a

post-Revolution individualism that stressed the values of liberty and equality. As she puts it, “losing oneself in the waltz is ... one of the most symbolic cultural expressions of this frame of mind” (Katz 278). Furthermore, where “social dancing ... seems to isolate the individual in a trance-like self-absorption which virtually disconnects him from the world and even his partner,” Katz attributes this effect specifically to the waltz:

The waltz ... not only made it possible to lose consciousness of time and space, but by introducing sensual thrills and encouraging free erotic expression it also succeeded in providing the ‘desert island’ to which one might escape. In this sense the waltz may have represented a world in which only the senses were operative, a world which was devoid of responsibility, an experience of self and self-involvement, an escape from reality and a surrender to the moment. (270)

Because of its dizzying nature and intoxicating 3/4 metre, the waltz was seen by many in polite society to have the undesirable effect of loosening inhibitions, an effect heightened by the way the couples actually held each other in a tight embrace.²⁵ Indeed, it is to an implicitly socially destabilising eroticism that Gautier refers in “La Cafetière” when Théodore describes dancing with Angéla. “Le sein de la jeune fille touchait ma poitrine, sa joue veloutée effleurait la mienne, et son haleine suave flottait sur ma bouche,” he recalls, and “mes nerfs tressaillaient comme des ressorts d’acier, mon sang coulait dans mes artères en torrent de lave, et j’entendais battre mon cœur comme une

²⁵ For example, in his satirical poem “The Waltz,” Byron writes of its “lewd grasp and lawless rapture warm” (Byron 1: 501). Parallel to the increasing popularity of theatrical dancing as a bourgeois entertainment was the growth of social dancing, in part fuelled by a waltz craze that swept Europe during the early nineteenth century. See Peter Buckman, *Let’s Dance* (London: Paddington Press, 1978) 123-131. See also Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp *The History of Dance* (London: Orbis 1981) 101-103.

montre accrochée à mes oreilles” (60-61). As the dance gathers momentum and draws to its conclusion in Angéla’s collapse, he is “inondé d’une joie ineffable” (61). Moreover, there is also a strong inference of sexual arousal in Théodore’s initial, physical response to Angéla; if as he puts it, “Les pieds me brûlaient de danser avec elle” (60), his feet are clearly metonymic of erotic desire in much the way that, for Gautier, the foot of the *danseuse* is synecdochic for her erotic body. Thus it is possible to read this couple’s waltz as a metaphor for coitus, and Théodore’s dream as an erotic, even masturbatory, fantasy.²⁶

In “La Cafetière,” Gautier associates the waltz with escape in the form of carnal pleasure; but because Angéla is both corpse and living woman, by extension, to waltz—*valser*—is also to succumb to a dangerous erotic power. This view is supported by examining the parallels between Gautier’s short story, and the scenario for the ballet *Giselle* that he wrote some years later.²⁷ That Angéla will “die” and become a *vivante-morte* if she dances too much is intimated by the disembodied voice that Théodore hears cautioning, “Angéla, vous pouvez danser avec monsieur, si cela vous fait plaisir, mais vous savez ce qui en résultera”(Rf 60). (There is a bizarre ring to this given that Angéla is already dead.) Similarly, if more explicitly, Berthe warns Giselle, “Malheureuse enfant! tu danseras toujours, tu te feras mourir, et après ta mort tu deviendras Wili!” (*Ésd* 119). If, for Gautier, the love of dancing expresses a transgressive, thanatotic power, the wilis’ quintessence is expressed by their “valse impitoyable” (117); this is the dance by which they ensnare men. When they capture the ill-fated Hilarion, for example, they “le passent

²⁶ In fact, many of Gautier’s erotic verses take masturbation as their theme. See *Oeuvres érotiques, poèmes suivis des lettres à la Présidente*. Charlieu: La Bartavelle, n.d.

²⁷ Gautier wrote “La Cafetière” in 1831, ten years before he conceived the idea of *Giselle*.

de main en main; à la valseuse fatiguée succède une autre valseuse, et toujours la danse infernale” (123). Here the waltz expresses a power that threatens linear consciousness in the “real” sense; men caught in its impetus, as if in a vortex, are swept to their deaths.

Where the waltz is a catalyst for releasing the unconscious, its power is compulsive. As he dances with Angéla, Théodore notes that “l’orchestre eût triplé de vitesse,” yet, “chose remarquable, nous n’avions besoin de faire aucun effort pour le suivre” (*Rf* 61). Unlike Albrecht in *Giselle*, Théodore does not succumb to fatigue—it is Angéla who collapses—yet his tirelessness implies that the dance itself has a demonic force. (In his discussion of “La Cafetière,” Whyte notes that Paganini’s playing of the violin was seen as diabolic because of its rapidity.) It is interesting to note, therefore, that, in his review of the *bayadères* who performed in Paris in 1838, Gautier describes a *pas de colombes* performed by two female dancers, namely Ramgoun and Saoundiroun, as a “valse effrénée.” In their circular movements and alarming pace, enhanced by the effect of the spiralling of the fabric with which they dance, Gautier writes that the dancers “pivotent sur elles-mêmes avec une rapidité effrayante” (*Ésd* 71).²⁸ He then notes, “Ce qu’il y a de plus surprenant, c’est qu’après cette valse délirante, qui dure près d’une demi-heure, les bayadères ne laissant apercevoir aucun signe de fatigue” (71).

For Gautier, the term *valser* signifies all forms of escape through non-linear, or rotational “dance” movement. Importantly, because it is sensual and self-absorbing, and because it is a catalyst for escaping the strictures of self-consciousness *through the body*,

²⁸ These dancers offered a foretaste of the dance with spiralling fabric for which Loie Fuller became famous. Gautier writes: “quelque chose de blanc scintille et voltige au milieu du tourbillon; c’est une écharpe que les valseuses chiffonnent et tourmentent entre leurs doigts; ... au sein du nuage papillonnant vous voyez déjà poindre le bec du pigeon ... [et] après le pigeon viennent le nid et le palmier avec ses feuilles figurées par les bouillons de l’étoffe.” Ivor Guest points out that the poem “Les Colombes,” published in *l’Entr’acte* on August 16, 1838, was the point of departure for the dance. See Guest *Ésd* 70, n.10.

circular dance expresses an impulse opposed to (and subversive of) everything he abhors about contemporary society, including bourgeois Puritanism and an overweening belief in science and progress. In addition, circular motion, when perceived as a visual motif, also challenges Western art's privileging of the central idea. As Rae Beth Gordon points out, by the mid-nineteenth century, French writers and artists had come to value ornamentation not as peripheral to, but as the essence of, art. Moreover, because it was purely decorative and "inessential" to "utilitarian" form, ornamentation became closely affiliated with the *l'art pour l'art* movement.²⁹ Gordon illustrates these points by quoting Gautier's remark that "the accessory must *play as important a role* as the principal subject" (Gordon 4, her emphasis). Indeed, the relevance of circular or spiralling to Gautier's aesthetic can be further clarified by reference to his views on Islamic art. When he sees its spiralling patterns "decompose ad infinitum in ever-new combinations and meanderings" serving "to express dreams of the infinite" (13), Gautier could equally be referring to the effect of circular dance.³⁰

That spinning, or waltzing, expresses an essentially Oriental mode of being is posited by Gautier when he writes not only of the *bayadères*, but also the whirling dervishes whom he saw perform in Constantinople. Their "dance" does indeed reinforce

²⁹ Rae Beth Gordon, "An Introduction to Ornament," *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992) 3-28.

³⁰ From Gautier, "Les barbares modernes: A l'Exposition Universelle de Londres," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1978) 354. It is interesting to note that the nineteenth-century aesthete Eugène Véron describes ornament in terms very similar to those Gautier uses when writing about ballet. Where Véron defines decorative art as the search for visual or auditory pleasure, it is "without the necessary intervention of ideas or feelings" (qtd. in Gordon 11). This is remarkably like Gautier's remark that ballet is purely visual. Arguably, *all* dance for Gautier is "ornamental." The connection between ornament and ballet seems to be verified, also by one of its defining poses, the arabesque.

the idea of moving rotationally as a surrendering to “dreams of the infinite,” or, to use Katz’s words, losing “consciousness of time and space.” Accordingly, the dervishes

valsaient, les bras étendus en croix, la tête inclinée sur les épaules, les yeux demi-clos, la bouche entr’ouverte comme des naguers confiants qui se laissent emporter par le fleuve de l’extase; leurs mouvements, réguliers, ondulueux, avaient une souplesse extraordinaire; nul effort sensible, nulle fatigue apparente; le plus intrépide valseur allemand serait tombé mort de suffocation; eux continuaient de tourner sur eux-mêmes comme poussés par la suite de leur impulsion, de même qu’une toupie pivote immobile au moment de la plus grande rapidité, et semble s’endormir au bruit de son ronflement. (*Const* 138-9)

By using the verb *valser* to depict the dervishes’ “dance,” Gautier shows that he sees a connection between the dervishes’ spinning and the popular European dance. From *walzen*, “to waltz” means to revolve, and the French verb *valser*, as defined by the *Trésor de la Langue Française*, signifies not only the act of performing the dance itself, but also “[ê]tre projeté,” with all that that implies of a loss of agency. Thus, in both in effect, and in kind, the waltz is “Oriental.”

Furthermore, the “lien mystérieux” that Gautier perceives between Spanish and Oriental dancing (*Ésd* 266) is in the spiralling movement and hypnotic effect of both. The dancer who demonstrates that link is Petra Cámara, whom he compares directly with the dervishes:

Sa gorge s’enfle, sa tête se renverse, ses longs yeux se ferment, un sourire nerveux bridé sur ses dents serrées, ses bras flottent comme des écharpes, et



Fig. 8. Petra Camara.

elle paraît s'endormir et se voiler dans sa rapidité comme une libellule au milieu de la roue de gaze de ses ailes; tout entière à quelque rêve divin, elle oublie le public et ne tien plus à la terre que par le bout du pied. Elle nous a rappelé, dans ces moments-là, les derviches tourneurs de Péra, avec leurs yeux blancs, leurs faces rayonnantes d'effluves et leurs bouches entrouvertes par les béatitudes du paradis.... [L']entraînement obstiné du rythme amène la Petra Cámara à des résultats pareils à ceux obtenus par les tourneurs; elle entre dans le monde pirouettant, vertigineux, traversé d'ondulations sonores et lumineuses. (*Ésd* 266)

To sum up, for Gautier, the waltz denotes any rotational movement that induces “escape,” whether physical or spiritual. To waltz, to spin—to turn on one’s own axis—is both “feminine” and “Oriental” because it is non-teleological: it has no goal or final destination other than the ecstatic surrender of self.³¹ It is useful to recall not only Said’s hypothesis, but also Huyssen’s observation that high Modernism was later to define mass culture as feminine, and that, according to nineteenth-century attitudes, dancing, by its very essence, *is* feminine.

Furthermore, for Gautier, the effect of circular and spiralling motion extends to the spectator. When writing about Cámara, for example, he sees her movements sweep away the spectator in a shared vertiginous loss of self-consciousness:

³¹ Along with his belief in the purposelessness of art, Gautier was vehemently opposed to any notion of art as didactic. Because he did not believe that society was perfectible at any level, he rejected the idea that “progress” was a movement towards social improvement. For a discussion of this aspect of Gautier’s aesthetic, see Elwood Hartman, *French Romantics on Progress: Human and Aesthetic* (Potomac, Maryland: Studio Humanitatis, 1983). In this, Gautier foreshadows Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return, for which circular movement is an obvious metaphor. As I show later, this aspect of Gautier’s aesthetic seems to prepare the way for W.B. Yeats’s idiosyncratic idea of the gyre.

Battez du sel, du piment, des cantharides, dans du vif-argent, et vous n'aurez encore qu'un terme de comparaison bien froid pour exprimer cette flame, ce délire, ce tourbillon, ce vertige, qui électrisent toute la salle et la feraient pivoter comme une table tournante, avec ses deux mille spectateurs. (*Ésd* 266)

Gautier's reference to cantharides emphasises the aphrodisiac effect of Cámara's erotically supercharged, curvilinear dancing; but it also provides an image of "erotic" art's power to seduce or jolt the spectators out of their bourgeois torpor. In a projection of his own synaesthetic response, Gautier depicts the spectators' experience of sexual arousal and aesthetic pleasure as inseparable. In a sense, to write *is* to dance; and in expressing what he hyperbolically deems to be inexpressible, Gautier derives pleasure from *depicting* sensual excitation, the *jouissance* of art that also unites artist and viewer. Indeed, his reviews of dancers are as much displays of his own ability to write freely—or "erotically"—as they are records of the dancer's art. Even more importantly, where Gautier's scopophilia—his pleasure in watching dancers—intersects with his pleasure in writing about them, it can be inferred that, for him, all art derives from the same wellspring, the unconscious, or "universal" desire for beauty and ontological unity.³²

Like a number of his fellow Romantic artists, Gautier experimented with hashish and opium; however, he considered their hallucinatory effect to be superfluous to the authentic literary mind. In his portrait of Baudelaire, he mentions the séances he had

³² If erotic and aesthetic pleasure, creative expression, and the yearning to escape the self all derive from the unconscious, there is cause to reflect on how Gautier's aesthetic—especially when read in relation to his view of the dancer—prefigures Freud's theories on the unconscious and art that, in turn, led to Kristeva's theories. Certainly, Gautier can be seen to lay the groundwork for Modernism's self-aware attempts to explore what the conscious self represses.

attended at the hotel Pimodan, and to which he had previously referred in the *Revue des deux mondes* under the title of “Le Club des haschichins.” “Après une dizaine d’expériences,” he writes, “nous renonçâmes pour toujours à cette drogue enivrante, non qu’elle nous eût fait mal physiquement, mais le vrai littérateur n’a besoin que de ses rêves naturels, et il n’aime pas que sa pensée subisse l’influence d’un agent quelconque” (*Ps* 268-9). Nonetheless, it seems likely that Gautier used his experiences of drug taking as the basis for two of his short stories, “La Pipe d’opium” (1838) and “Le Club des hachichins” (1846).³³ Both stories are interesting for this reason, but they also deserve attention for the way in which Gautier not only features women as key figures in the narrator’s drug-induced visions, but also idealises them in ways that imply they are dancers.³⁴ In the “La Pipe d’opium,” the narrator has a vision of a beautiful seductress who “materialises” out of the air to reveal the “petit pied” of the dancer; and in “Le Club des hachichins,” he actually imagines he is transformed into such a woman.

In Part 6 of “Le Club des hachichins,” appropriately entitled “Kief” (and defined by Gautier as “cette période bienheureuse du hachich”), the narrator experiences a kind of *jouissance* in which phenomena transmute, and the “escape” from self is realised in a “real” subject-object merging. Along with the feeling of being enveloped in a “vapeur bleuâtre” that is “humide et parfumée ... comme l’eau d’un bain,” he experiences an ecstatic dissolution of the self that obliterates all earthly desire; as he puts it “Roméo hachichin eût oublié Juliette” (*Rf* 226-7). Nonetheless, as he gazes with “un oeil paisible”

³³ The inconsistent spelling of *haschichins* is Gautier’s.

³⁴ Gautier first took opium in 1838, and hashish in 1843. Peter Whyte argues convincingly that “La Pipe d’opium” is almost certainly autobiographical. See Peter Whyte, *Théophile Gautier: Conteur fantastique et merveilleux* (Durham: U of Durham Press, 1996), 40.

upon a “guirlande de femmes idéalement belles qui couronnaient la frise de leur divine nudité,” the narrator itemises their physical attributes, not the least among them their “petits pieds à plantes roses” (*Rf* 227). If thus Gautier fetishises these phantom women as dancers, it is with one of them that he experiences fusion: “je me fondais dans l’objet fixé, et je devenais moi-même cet objet” (*Rf* 227). This vision confirms, if obliquely, that for Gautier, an escape into fantasy—albeit artificially induced—breaks down the distinction not just between the subject and a generalised object, but also between the observer and the dancer.

Gautier wrote “Le Club des hachichins” in 1846; it seems appropriate, therefore, to speculate as to whether “Kief” is his fantasy of a Platonic union with his ideal woman and dancer, Carlotta Grisi. By that time, Gautier had written the scenario for both *Giselle* (1841) and *La Péri* (1843), the two ballets with which she was strongly associated. The woman who appears in the opium vision of the earlier story is named Carlotta (*Rf* 161), and that she emerges from “des petits flocons blancs ... comme touffes de laine emportées par le vent, ou comme un collier de colombe qui s’égrène dans l’air” (*Rf* 157) seems to confirm her status as the supernatural being/ballerina incarnate. But as Peter Whyte points out, “La Pipe d’opium” was written some time before Gautier had become enamoured with Grisi. In 1838—the year of the story’s publication—she had yet to establish her reputation and it was unlikely that he had met her.³⁵

It is noteworthy, however, that when the narrator sees “une forme de jeune fille envelopée dans une large draperie de mousseline,” it is her feet, exposed like a dancer’s beneath her diaphanous, muslin skirts, that attract his attention:

³⁵ As Whyte also points out, Gautier was not, at first, particularly taken with Grisi; his reviews of her dancing when she first appeared at the Paris Opéra are lukewarm. See Gautier *Ésd* 111.

Ses pieds, entièrement nus, ... étaient ... charmants, d'une petitesse et d'une transparence qui me firent penser à ces beaux pieds de jaspe qui sortent si blancs et si purs de la jupe de marbre noir d'Isis antique du Musée. (*Rf* 157)

In its focus, this description bears a remarkable resemblance to Gautier's representations of dancers' bodies to which I refer in the previous chapter, where the foot, synecdochic of woman as artefact, reveals her ethereality and transcendence. Although in this, the original version of "La Pipe d'opium," the phantom woman is a singer (*Rf* 161), Gautier represents her in a way similar to the *danseuse* who embodies his ideal of woman-as-escapist-art. As Whyte points out, there is a later version of the story in which "Carlotta" is a dancer; here, in his words: "le joli pied transparent de la cantratrice se metamorphose en le talon fétichisé de la danseuse" (Whyte 42).³⁶ That this dancer is Carlotta Grisi seems very likely, considering that she came to be the inspiration and dedicatee for Gautier's later novel *Spirite* (1866). Significantly, in this work (which I discuss at the end of this chapter), the protagonist—who happens to be a writer—achieves a *permanent* transcendent union in death with the beloved object, who, like Giselle, exerts her seductive power from beyond the grave.

Both "La Pipe d'opium" and "Le Club des hachichins" feature visions of an idealised woman who is a catalyst for the narrator's temporary escape from the confines of subjectivity. Whether, in these two stories, she *is* Carlotta Grisi is a matter for conjecture. What is certain, however, is that Grisi danced the title role in *La Péri*, the balletic version of Gautier's short story "La Mille et deuxième nuit" which was premièred in July, 1843, two years after her success in *Giselle*, and eight years after, and

³⁶ Whyte notes that in the later version of "Le Club des hachichins," Gautier substituted opium for hashish.

four years before, the first publications of “La Pipe d’Opium,” and “Le Club des hachichins,” respectively.³⁷ *La Péri* parallels both literary works as an escapist fantasy, except that here the woman of idealised beauty clearly *is* a dancer. An “Oriental” ballet set in Cairo, *La Péri* tells the story of the hero Achmet’s pursuit of ideal beauty in the form of an immortal peri who appears before him in a vision. When Achmet proves worthy of the peri’s love, his reward is union with her in paradise.³⁸

That *La Péri* tells of Gautier’s own need to escape is shown in the letter to de Nerval that he wrote expressing his alienation from the status quo and proclaiming his “Turkish” identity:

Dans cette préoccupation de l’Orient, un jour de pluie grise et de vent aigre, j’avais commencé, par réaction sans doute, je ne sais quoi, comme un petit poème turc ou persan; et j’en avais déjà écrit vingt vers lorsque cette idée judicieuse me tomba du plafond, que si j’en écrivais davantage, personne au monde ne les lirait sous aucun prétexte. Les vers sont la langue des dieux, et ne sont lus que par les dieux, au grand désespoir des éditeurs. Je jetai donc mes strophes dans le panier aux ébauches, et prenant un carré de papier, je confiai mon sujet aux jolis petits pieds. (*Ésd* 135)

These comments show how the ballet provided Gautier with the chance to express his ideas to a wider non-élite audience. From what he goes on to say, it is also clear that *La*

³⁷ There is some uncertainty as to when Gautier actually wrote the scenario. On February 3, 1842, the *Courrier des Théâtres* reported that Gautier had submitted a new scenario; the *Coureur des Spectacles* referred specifically to *La Péri* on December 7, 1842, as did *La Presse* on January 16, 1843. “La Mille et deuxième nuits” was published in August 1842. See Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (London: Pitman, 1966), 220-21.

³⁸ For a background to the influences on, and production of, *La Péri* see Binney 105-162.

Péri was effectively a staging of the self, and that Achmet's escape is the precarious fulfilment of Gautier's own desire. In the opening scene, where his hero seeks solace in opium-induced visions, Gautier obviously speaks of himself:

Ce n'est pas l'intrigue, l'aventure, les complications, les maris trompés, que cherche mon don Juan, mais la possession de la beauté dans toutes ses formes et sous tous ses aspects.... Comme tous les grands voluptueux, il est amoureux de l'impossible; il voudrait s'élancer, dans les régions idéales, à la recherche de la beauté sans défaut; l'ivresse ne lui suffit pas, il lui faut l'extase; à l'aide de l'opium, il tâche de dénouer les liens qui enchaînent l'âme au corps.... Il veut d'un amour avec des ailes de flamme, un corps de lumière qui se meuve dans l'infini et dans l'éternité comme un oiseau dans l'air. (*Ésd* 136)

Gautier's image of transcendence, here expressed in terms of flight that prefigure his later poem "Ce que disent les Hirondelles," is personified in the winged peri-Grisi with her "poses d'oiseau" (140), and whose ability to float like "une plume de colombe soutenue par l'air" (141) recalls the *femme-fantôme* in "La Pipe d'opium."

In Part 5 of "Le Club des Hachichins," the narrator, under the influence of hashish, has a vision in which dancing and writing are analogous; he relates how he sees a group of comic actors (all contemporaries known to Gautier) dance in order to "write" texts of unsurpassable excellence:

je pus les voir se livrant à des danses telles que n'en connut jamais la Renaissance au temps de Chicard, ou l'Opéra sous le règne de Mussard, le roi du quadrille échevelé. Ces danseurs, mille fois supérieurs à Molière, à

Rabelais, à Swift et à Voltaire, écrivaient, avec un entrechat ou un balancé, des comédies si profondément philosophiques, des satires d'une si haute portée et d'un sel si piquant, que j'étais obligé de me tenir les côtes dans mon coin.

Daucus-Carota exécutait, tout en s'essuyant les yeux des pirouettes et des cabrioles inconcevables. (*Rf* 223)

Although their repertoire includes a turning step, the *pirouette*, these “dancers,” unlike Gautier’s waltzers, are not swept away by the momentum of their movements. On the contrary, they excel in the execution of the ballet steps that they use to “write” for their specific genres.³⁹ (All the steps mentioned—especially the *pirouette*, the *entrechat*, and the *cabriole*—require technical control.) Thus the comedians “write” their comedies and satires, not in “free” and abandoned movement, but with steps chosen for their particular effect.

Moreover, these dancers’ control of their medium is paralleled by that of the narrator who autonomously observes and records at a distance; as he notes, “j’étais obligé de me tenir les côtes dans mon coin” (223). In this way, Gautier shows the paradox of the writer/narrator and writer/protagonist who, even while hallucinating, retains his detachment and agency. Moreover, both “La Pipe d’opium” and “Le Club des hachichins” are written as first-person narratives, a technique which heightens the subjectivity of events; there is no objective eye to validate their occurrence, and the

³⁹ If to waltz is to lose control, paradoxically, it is a loss through prescribed movement (the waltz has specific, if simple, steps); therefore when Gautier writes about the “waltzing” dervishes, there is a slippage in that he depicts escape as predicated on the existence of rules and structures. Neither is Romantic art, albeit released from the tyranny of neoclassical rules, without structure. This explains why, for Gautier, the dancer is as much sculpted, Classical form as she is Dionysian body. Even Spanish dance, with its freedom of expression, is underpinned by the structure of its set steps.

solipsism of the dreaming, or “writing,” subject is stressed as distinct from the perceived object. We can see in praxis the paradox of the Romantic writer whose desire for a merging with the Other is balanced by his drive to self-assertion. Gautier creates escapist art both within, and *as* dream, but dream shaped and structured by the mind that controls the writing hand (or dancing foot). He rejects what Baudelaire terms the “*paradis artificiel*” (*PsI* 266, Gautier’s italics) because for him only the ecstasy induced by art—the artefact created from the imagination of “le vrai littéraire”—is authentic. Gautier reaffirms the subject-object division because, as a writer, and particularly as a reviewer of dance, he must retain his autonomy.

Similarly, in “La Cafetière,” Théodore’s role as observer-narrator is reinforced by the sense that he speaks with the author’s voice. For example, when he notes that the tapestry figures “se mit à pirouetter comme une toupie d’Allemagne,” and that the “robes de soie des femmes, froissées dans ce tourbillon dansant, rendaient de sons d’une nature particulière; on aurait dit le bruit d’ailes d’un vol de pigeons” (*Rf* 59), Théodore uses Gautierien metaphors and symbols for escape. The figures who spin like German tops, and who create a sound-picture of birds in flight may be extensions of the narrator’s psyche, but like the swallows in “Ce que disent les hirondelles,” they “speak” with Gautier’s voice. (It is worth noting that the shortened version of the narrator’s name is identical to Gautier’s diminutive, “Théo.”) Unlike Achmet, Théodore does not “die” in ecstatic union with his beloved, but lives to tell his tale and thereby reaffirm his separateness; he is able to re-engage with the “real” world that is bound by time and space, and occupied by inanimate things.⁴⁰ The agency of the armchairs and the coffee

⁴⁰ “La Cafetière” was first published in 1831, ten years before the première of *Giselle*.

pot in a sense proves that Théodore had escaped the utilitarian world, and *was* dreaming, while Angéla's relegation to object—the fragment of a coffee pot—verifies his re-awakening as subject. Paradoxically, the writer escapes from the bonds of daily reality into the realm of the creative imagination in order to affirm the subjective “je.”⁴¹

Whether as narrator, or reviewer, Gautier is always the detached and privileged observer to whom the phenomenal world offers endless aesthetic delights and possibilities for interpretation. In fact, Gautier was not ingenuous on the subject of what he considered to be the poet's unique gift of seeing. Of Baudelaire he writes:

Il possède ... le don de *correspondance*[,]... c'est-à-dire qu'il sait découvrir par une intuition secrète des rapports invisibles à d'autres et rapprocher ainsi, par des analogies inattendues que seul le *voyant* peut saisir, les objets les plus éloignés et les plus opposés en apparence. Tout vrai poète est doué de cette qualité plus ou moins développée, qui est l'essence même de son art. (*Psl* 205-6, Gautier's emphasis)

Elsewhere Gautier remarks that “Il faut une longue étude pour apprendre à voir. Voir, c'est la moitié du génie” (*LP* November 2, 1836). It is interesting to note, therefore, that Mallarmé called Gautier “le *voyant*, qui, placé dans ce monde, l'a regardé,” and that he also commented on how the gaze was, for Gautier, a means of defining himself in terms of the Other: “C'est chose curieuse combien cet homme qui sait tout exprimer et qui a plus que tout autre le droit d'être blasé a la curiosité facile, et darde vivement son regard sur le *non-moi*” (*MC* 2: 37, Mallarmé's emphasis).

⁴¹ That Gautier frequently writes his reviews in the first person plural does not undermine my argument. Where he uses this technique to universalise his responses, he reinforces his centrality as arbiter of taste and aesthetic judgement.

It is Gautier's pleasure in looking at the *non-moi* that explains why, despite his contempt for ballet dancers as a group, and his loathing for journalism as an occupation, he enjoyed watching and writing about ballet. As "la poésie mimée, le rêve visible, l'idéal rendu palpable," ballet makes visible the fantasies and dreams that are the essence of all art:

Le ballet est, avant tout, d'une essence poétique, et procède de la rêverie plutôt que de la réalité. Il n'existe guère qu'à la condition de demeurer fantastique et d'échapper au monde que nous coudoyons dans la rue. (*Ésd* 236)

On one level, then, ballet provides Gautier with an escape from reality; but on another, it stages an endless source of observable phenomena about which to write. In his words:

"Un ballet ... est un rêve muet qu'on fait tout éveillé et auquel on met des paroles" (*Ésd* 210). And "le rêve *visible*" (*Ésd* 236, my emphasis) is a dream in wakefulness during which the observer's subjectivity not only remains intact, but is actually reinforced.

Because ballet is staged, framed and highlighted within the proscenium arch as if it were indeed, "un peintre ou un statuaire, ... la pensée visible" (*Ésd* 311), the dissolution of self is contained; from his vantage point in the auditorium, Gautier retains his consciousness as the (re)viewer who evaluates and recreates what is before him.

The full significance of the artist's gaze in relation to the ambiguous status of the dancer as woman and artefact, and Gautier's wish to escape, are encapsulated in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, where he writes:

Je comprends parfaitement une statue, je ne comprends pas un homme; où la vie commence, je m'arrête et recule effrayé comme si j'avais vu la tête de

Méduse. Le phénomène de la vie me cause un étonnement dont je ne puis
revenir. (*MM* 252)

If life immobilises Gautier with terror, Gautier immobilises life to escape its horrors, and if he does not understand “man,” it is upon woman that he casts his Medusan gaze, transfixing her as pure, chaste art. As Maxime du Camp reports, Gautier once said, “j’ai toujours préféré la statue à la femme et le marbre à la chair” (du Camp, 187). Indeed, because Gautier sees dance as “la volupté physique et la beauté féminine,” he also sees it as “une espèce de bas-relief peint ou de peintre sculptée” (*Ésd* 291). Gautier “freezes,” or renders “dead,” either metaphorically or in “reality,” the dancer’s transient beauty in order to preserve it in perpetuity as art. The transfixing, or immortalising of *incarnate* beauty is essential to an aesthetic that posits art as transcendent; insofar as it transcends life, art also transcends death. (It is no coincidence that, in a number of Gautier’s works, including “Le Pied de momie,” the protagonists idolise women who are preserved, literally, as mummies.) Not surprisingly, because her ephemeral physical beauty is enhanced by the transience of her art—her movements fade almost at the moment of their inception—the dancer is very much the focus of Gautier’s transfixing gaze. He preserves and immortalises dancers, on one level, simply by writing about them in his reviews; but on another, he does so by representing them as the supernatural beings and the *vivantes-mortes* that haunt the dream worlds created in his scenarios and his creative writing.

That the artist’s gaze drains the life from corporeal beauty and transfixes it as “immortal” art is the central theme of Gautier’s novella *Jettatura* (1856). But although *Jettatura* can be seen as a metaphor for the artist’s relationship with the visual world, it also reveals the destructive nature of that relationship and its self-annihilating

consequences. Set in Naples—portentously, its opening includes “la phrase sacramentelle: ‘*Vedi Napoli e poi mori*’” (*Rf* 380, Gautier’s italics)—*Jettatura* tells of the young painter Paul d’Aspremont’s increasing obsession with the idea that he has the evil eye. This obsession is fuelled by his persecution as an outsider by the Neapolitans, and Paul comes to believe that, by degrees, his gaze is killing Alicia Ward, the exceptionally beautiful young Englishwoman whom he loves. His mounting horror at the life-draining power of his gaze is compounded by the belief that he had earlier caused the death of the English dancer Clara Webster. After blinding himself in a futile attempt to prevent Alicia’s death, he takes his own life.

This story is fascinating on a number of levels but is of particular interest here for the way it highlights both Gautier’s perception of the artist’s role and his view of the dancer as a trope for ideal beauty detached from the utilitarian sphere. Before blinding himself, Paul spends some time saturating his memory with images he will never again see, and, significantly, Gautier presents these images as if they were staged in a theatre and their exclusion from view as if the conclusion of a performance. After instructing his “yeux ... meurtriers” (464) to absorb all the beauty of the natural world before them (*Rf* 464-5), Paul commands them, “Allez, voyez, promenez-vous. Le rideau va tomber entre vous et le décor de l’univers!” (465). Where Gautier presents the visual world as if it were staged for the artist’s gaze, it is art distanced from mundane existence. (Gautier also describes the scenes in *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* as if he were looking upon a series of stage sets.) To take the theatre analogy further, when the “dream” world of the stage is veiled from the artist and he can no longer see beyond the auditorium, he is confined to the “real” (bourgeois) world. The Platonic overtones of Gautier’s aesthetic are,

paradoxically, both affirmed and denied. On the one hand, the yearning for ideal beauty is the route to ultimate, transcendent reality, and, on the other, the “false” world of art—the flickering of figures on the cave wall—is the ultimate “reality,” or (*unreality*). (This contradiction parallels Gautier’s insistence on “chaste” voluptuousness and the notion of transcendence through the body.)

Gautier similarly defines the world of the stage as the domain of the ideal when, in *Jettatura*, he describes the event that led to the death of Clara Webster. The narrator relates how Paul used to attend performances at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London because he was particularly struck by Webster’s grace and melancholy beauty. On one such occasion, he recalls, he witnessed her spin so close to the footlights—“emportée par le vol circulaire d’une valse” (*Rf* 428)—that her costume caught fire and she was so badly burned that she later died.⁴² Convinced that it was his gaze that drew the dancer too close to the “étincelante ligne de feu qui sépare au théâtre le monde idéal du monde réel,” Paul “se considèrait comme son assassin” (*Rf* 428-429). (It is useful to recall that, for Gautier, the “ligne de feu” also marks the boundary between the dancer’s “chaste” eroticism, and mere coquetry, and to note that Webster’s otherworldly status is confirmed by her “légères draperies de sylphide [qui] palpitaient comme des ailes de colombe prêtes à prendre l’essor” [428]). That Paul sees his gaze as fatal to the dancer underlines and dramatises the subject/object division specifically between the artist (or reviewer) and the ideal beauty he sees. But here, the ambivalent response of Rousseau’s Pygmalion towards

⁴² On December 14, 1844, in a London production of the ballet *La Révolte au sérail*, Clara Webster’s costume caught fire, and she died of her burns three days later. A year earlier, she was one of the principal dancers in a production *La Péri* at Drury Lane, London, in which Carlotta Grisi was dancing the lead role. Gautier also records Webster’s death in *La Presse*, December 23, 1844. See *Ésd* 174-5. See also Ivor Guest *Victorian Ballet Girl: The Tragic Story of Clara Webster* (London: A. and C. Black) 1957.

Galatea translates as one of pathological horror: just as the artist's gaze is drawn by beauty, so it also draws beauty to the threshold of the "real" world, where it is destroyed.⁴³

Paradoxically, though, the same gaze that "kills" the dancer also "purifies" and preserves beauty; and this is, literally, what happens—at least from Paul's perspective—in *Jettatura*. Whenever he looks at Alicia, the life seems to drain from her: "Comme sous mon regard elle a pâli" (431), he notes. And when he gazes upon her for the last time before her death, she appears as if on the threshold of transfiguration: "la femme avait presque disparu pour faire place à l'ange: ses chairs étaient transparentes, éthérées, lumineuses; on apercevait l'âme à travers comme une lueur dans une lampe d'albâtre" (465). Ironically, Paul does not save Alicia's life; she dies soon after he blinds himself. But he now appropriates her beauty, and, in his memory, preserves it at its apogee. In Paul's words, "Maintenant mes yeux peuvent s'éteindre, je la verrai toujours dans mon coeur" (466).

Yet, when Paul blinds himself to protect Alice from his gaze, he symbolically and proleptically destroys his power as an artist. Thus Gautier confirms the oculocentricity of his aesthetic—to paraphrase him, the artist who does not "see" everything is not an artist—and it is relevant to recall that, according to Freud (in relation to Oedipal anxiety), self-blinding is a symbolic castration, or emasculation.⁴⁴ Paul's self-mutilation, therefore,

⁴³ In 1863, French dancer Emma Livry also died of burns several agonising months after her costume caught fire whilst she was rehearsing for a revival of *La Muette de Portici*. See Guest, *Ballet of the Second Empire* vol.1 (London: A and C Black). In a tribute to her, Gautier writes "Elle pouvait imiter ce vol fantastique et charmant qui se pose sur les fleurs et ne les courbe pas. Elle ressemblait trop au papillon; ainsi que lui, elle a brûlé ses ailes à la flamme" (*Esd* 309-10).

⁴⁴ See Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Complete Psychological Works of Freud*, vol. 17, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) 217-52.

can be seen as a startlingly apt metaphor for his anxiety as the artist-*voyant* at odds with a patriarchal, philistine world. This is confirmed when, after Alicia's death, he throws himself into the sea, a gesture that, similarly, has Freudian resonances. Ostensibly an act of expiation, this, his "real" self-destruction, can be seen as the ultimate rejection of the external, masculine rationalistic world antithetical to art. Paul's drowning—in Freudian terms, an immersion in "oceanic" consciousness—is a symbolic plunge into the feminine sphere that recalls Meïamoun's fatal swim into Cléopâtre's domain.⁴⁵ (It is highly relevant, then, that Paul's belief that he is a *jettatore* is fuelled by his rejection as an outsider by the Neapolitans; by extension, he is also alienated as an artist and *bohemien* from his French compatriots.)⁴⁶ Indeed, Paul's Romantic sensibilities are emphasised by his lack of the rational scepticism that enables the Protestant Alicia (415) and her pragmatic (and bible-reading) uncle (441) to reject the Neapolitans' belief in the evil eye.

Alicia is not a dancer; nonetheless, she shares with Gautier's preferred dancers their ambiguous status of woman-as-art, or *vivante-morte*. As Alicia oscillates between life and death, she is idealised as art in terms that recall those used to describe both the classical, sculptural beauty of Fanny Elssler, and the ethereal other-worldliness of Grisi/Giselle. She becomes "blanche comme une statue d'albâtre sur un tombeau" (*Rf* 441), and ultimately her beauty "se spiritualisait par la souffrance: la femme avait presque disparu pour faire place à l'ange: ses chairs étaient transparentes, éthérées,

⁴⁵ The suicide of disaffected young artists was a not an uncommon event in the nineteenth century. Gérard de Nerval, who hanged himself, is one example.

⁴⁶ Tobin Siebers points out that the power of the evil eye thrives on the possessor being an outsider. See Tobin Siebers, *The Mirror of the Medusa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1983) 90-99.

lumineuses; on apercevait l'âme à travers comme une lueur dans une lampe d'albâtre” (465).

Significantly, it is transparency, or a translucent whiteness—like the effect of flesh barely glimpsed through Giselle’s diaphanous gown—that signifies Alicia’s art/death-in-life state. Early in *Jettatura*, Gautier depicts Alicia’s transcendent beauty in terms of supreme whiteness: she displays “une peau d’une blancheur éblouissante à rendre jaune le lait, la neige, le lis, l’albâtre, la cire vierge, et tout ce qui sert aux poètes à faire des comparaisons blanches” (391-2). Indeed, whether in reference to her skin, the statue she resembles, the gown she wears, the air that she inhabits, or the way that she moves, whiteness is the *leitmotif* that throughout Gautier’s works signals the dancer’s ambiguities as woman and art, animation and stasis, eroticism and chasteness, life and death. Taglioni appears as “une blanche vision” (*Ésd* 78); Elssler reveals “la blancheur de la peau” (49); Grisi’s foot is encased in “satin blanc” and she floats as soundlessly as “un flocon de neige” (117); Carlotta emerges from “les vapeurs blanches” (*Rf* 157); and Angéla’s arms surround Théodore’s neck like “une écharpe blanche” (*Rf* 61). In Gautier’s depictions of dancers, to quote Felicia McCarren,

The body’s whiteness signals its removal to the realm of art or death; the whiteness functions both as the fixed color of the body’s reification or resurrection, or as a total lack of color, a blankness illustrating the body’s vacillation between human and inhuman, subject and object, alive and dead. (McCarren 64)⁴⁷

⁴⁷ As McCarren also points out, a number of Gautier’s poems in *Emaux et camées* deal with the transformation of woman into spirit form and whiteness likewise signals her ambiguous state. In “Symphonie en blanc majeur,” for example, a woman torments the poet with “des débauches de

In short, whiteness is an all-embracing trope for *l'art pour l'art* as embodied in the dancer; it signifies the chaste “vraie volupté” of *jouissance*, the desired but dangerous realm of transcendent art to which the writer-subject escapes from the bonds of the masculine, progressive, utilitarian world. To transpose Gautier’s words, whiteness signals art that offers “le rêve de l’amour dans la mort” (*LP* August 18, 1851).

Gautier made the above remark in response to Petra Cámara, the “Oriental” dancer who sent the spectators spinning in an electrifying and vertiginous loss of self-awareness, and it is Cámara who highlights the link between death and art; where Gautier immobilises the dancer as art, she is effectively “dead” as a woman. For example, in stressing Cámara’s superlative passion and sensuality, he writes, “Jamais l’ivresse du rythme, l’extase de la passion, la catalepsie de la volupté ne sont allées plus loin” (*Ésd* 266). Here, the paradox of frenzied movement in a quasi-permanent state of immobility has connotations of eroticised death that are explicit in an earlier review where Gautier represents Cámara as the incarnation of the fictitious Inès de Sierras, the murdered woman featured in Charles Nodier’s novel of the same name. When she appears before the four French “soldiers” who pass the night in her mansion, Cámara/Inès darts out of the gloom “immobile au milieu de son mouvement” (*LP* August 18, 1851).⁴⁸ Like the three-hundred-year-old spectre of Inès (and the wilis), moreover, she entices and repels; and where Gautier depicts her seductive dancing in tones of transparency and whiteness,

blancheur.” Similarly, in a later work, the sonnet “Ne touchez pas aux marbres,” Gautier shows the onlooker’s perception of idealised woman as art whose purity and divinity is emphasised by the whiteness of marble. See Gautier, *Poésies complètes* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1970), Tome 3, 22-24 and 216.

⁴⁸ Guest points out that Gautier was mistaken about the men being soldiers. In the novel, the so-called four officers were three officers and a muleteer (Guest, GSD 65).

he creates images of “cold” death oxymoronically juxtaposed with those of phallic power:

Elle danse avec une grâce languissante et morte, une nonchalance glaciale, une froideur de la sepulcre, un charme d l’autre monde, effrayant et délicieux qui fait brûler d’amour les officers glacés d’épouvante. ... Dans son extase endormie et sa danse somnambulique, elle lève de temps à autre ses paupières allourdies d’un sommeil de trois siècles, et il en jaillit un éclair si vif, si brûlant, si rempli d’ardeurs insensés et de folles promesses, qu’il entre dans le coeur comme un feu rouge dans la neige. Quand ce regard vous a touché, il faut le suivre fût-ce au fond des catacombes, par des escaliers et des souterrains à la Piranèse, fût-ce au fond des enfers. Vous avez l’inextinguible soif de l’impossible, le rêve de l’amour dans la mort. (*LP* August 18, 1851)⁴⁹

In depicting Cámara’s dancing, Gautier emphasises her many ambiguities as woman and art. She is the incarnation not only of the phantom Inès, but also, significantly, of Inès’s painted representation, and, like the wilis, death anthropomorphised as erotic woman. (In this, Gautier reverses the medieval and Renaissance convention of the death figure as male, and the seducer of beautiful young

⁴⁹ Gautier also wrote a poem “Inès de las Sierras” (published in *Émaux et camées* and dedicated to Petra Cámara) in which the dancer and the phantom are one and the same. He thereby further compounds the ambiguity of the woman and dancer as art. In the final two stanzas he writes:

J’ai vu ce fantôme au Gymnase,
Où Paris entier l’admira,
Lorsque dans son linceul de gaze
Parut la Petra Camara,

Impassable et passionnée,
Fermant ses yeux morts de langueur,
Et comme Inès l’assassinée
Dansant, un poignard dans le coeur!

(*Pc* 3: 60)

women.)⁵⁰ The Piranesian, subterranean path that spirals like the trajectory of the waltz, and down which Cámara draws the spectator, like Meïamoun's journey to Cléopâtre, leads into the depths of the pre-verbal realm of the imagination and to the ecstatic, orgasmic "death" of the artist in his escape through art.

Of all Gautier's written works, it is *Spirite* (1865), the full-length novel he wrote close to the end of his life, that most transparently reveals the importance of the dancer to his aesthetic. Here, in what is clearly Gautier's wish fulfilment and what P. E. Tennant rightly calls a Platonic myth (Tennant 87), the hitherto impossible "rêve de l'amour dans la mort" is realised. *Spirite* tells the story of the love between the protagonist, Guy de Malivert and a *vivante-morte* of idealised, transcendent beauty who is none other than the object of the writer's unrequited desire, Grisi/Giselle.⁵¹ Such is the power of *Spirite*'s spiritualised passion that she breaches the barrier between the mortal and spirit worlds, and, through her increasing appearances before Guy, fuels his desire for an ultimate, permanent union with her. Gradually Guy withdraws from the everyday world until, finally, he relinquishes life to "fly" eternally with her in a metaphysical realm.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). See also Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁵¹ There is ample evidence for this. Gautier wrote *Spirite* at Carlotta's estate in Geneva, and in a number of letters he wrote to the dancer, he refers directly to *Spirite*. In one, he writes, "Sous le voile d'une action [palpite] le vrai, le seul amour de mon coeur" (November 17, 1865); and in another "mon amour créera un ciel pour vous y embrasser éternellement et se fonder avec vous dans une perle de lumière comme Malivert et Spirite" (qtd. in Whyte 102). See also Richardson 198-9.

It is intriguing to note that a caricature of Gautier as a dancer in his ballet *Sacountala* was published in *Le Charivari*, August 1, 1858. It shows the writer in arabesque and soaring above the astonished Amalia Ferraris. Cham, its instigator seems to have recognised Gautier, if not as a frustrated dancer, at least as a man who wished to rise above earthly concerns.

⁵² In addition to "Le Cafetière," there are other short stories of Gautier's, such as "Omphale" and "La Morte amoureuse," that feature transcendently beautiful *femmes-fantômes* who communicate with the

In the opening of *Spirite*, Gautier presents Guy de Malivert, a young man of the *haut monde*, as suffering from the *ennui* of one alienated from the materialist values of his class, and consequently open to communication from the spiritual realm. “Guy ... était dans cette paresseuse disposition d’âme où l’absence de pensée est préférable à la plus belle idée exprimée en terms sublimes,” Gautier tells us, by way of explaining his protagonist’s distracted reading of a book that “n’était autre que l’*Évangeline* de Longfellow” (2). (Gautier also lists other works in Guy’s library as those by Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Schiller, Byron, Hugo, Saint-Beuve, de Musset and Poe [4], thereby establishing Guy’s non-bourgeois taste for classical and Romantic literature). Where Guy’s psychological state (and his literary taste) signal his incipient yearning for the feminine ideal and his receptiveness to the imminent appearance of the supernatural Spirite, so too does his disdain for the worldly beauty of his putative fiancée. In Mme d’Ymbercourt, Guy sees only the “perfections vulgaires” that signify her social status, and that are equally reflected in her bourgeois taste. After a detailed description of her drawing-room, Gautier remarks that “on eût pu croire qu’on était dans le salon d’un banquier, d’un avocat ou d’un Américain de passage.... Guy, artiste de nature, trouvait-il ce luxe affreusement bourgeois et déplaisant au possible” (22).

By contrast, Spirite is “d’une beauté dont la beauté mortelle n’est que l’ombre (65), and as with all Gautier’s idealised women—fictional and real—her earthly eroticism is transmuted as the chasteness of woman-as-art, and art-as-death. Represented in terms that recapitulate Gautier’s many images of dancers as blanched, translucent and ethereal,

hero from beyond the grave. *Spirite*, however, is the only fictional work in which Gautier depicts the protagonist’s after-death union with his beloved.

Spirite first appears to Guy as “une vague blancheur laiteuse” (63); on another occasion, she resembles “une plume ou un flocon de neige” (214); and finally she reveals herself as “une figure d’une éclatante blancheur” (233). Moreover, Spirite appears in settings that evoke the realm of the dancer and reflect the otherworldly, supremely non-bourgeois status of art. When she first appears to Guy, she gradually emerges from a Venetian mirror as if from the depths of a darkened stage. After describing in detail the mirror’s dazzlingly ornate frame (analogous to that of a painting, as well as the proscenium arch), Gautier then states that “Au milieu de ce scintillement, la glace ... paraissait d’un noir bleuâtre, indéfiniment profond, et ressemblait à une ouverture pratiquée sur un vide rempli d’idéales ténèbres” (63). Gautier further emphasises the theatricality of Spirite’s emergence by indicating that the mirror reflects none of the objects before it, and by likening it to a stage prop: “Chose bizarre, aucun des objets opposés ne s’y réfléchissait,” he remarks, “on eût dit une de ces glaces de théâtre que le décorateur couvre de teintes vagues” (63). Similarly, when Spirite later appears out-of-doors, she does so against the aestheticised, theatrical backdrop of a Paris covered with snow: exotically dressed skaters on the lake in the Bois de Boulogne appear as if they were dancers at a masked ball, thus forming “un spectacle gracieux, animé, charmant, digne du pinceau de Watteau, de Lancret ou de Baron” (82).

As blank as the mirror in which Spirite appears, with its surface “noirâtre et polie, rayée en tous sens par le tranchant des patins, comme ces miroirs de restaurateurs où les couples amoureux griffonnent leurs noms avec des carres de diamants” (81), the lake is the space upon which the dancer (and writer) inscribe text.⁵³ Where the skaters “dance,”

⁵³ Ross Chambers discusses the link between the lake and the mirror in terms of the blank page and writing in *Spirite de Théophile Gautier: Une lecture* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1974) 33.

they “décrivaient des courbes, des spirales, des huit, dessinaient des lettres,” all shapes that remind Gautier of Islamic art, specifically, the “cavaliers arabes qui, avec la pointe de l’éperon, écrivent à rebrousse-poil le nom d’Allah sur le flanc de leur monture” (81). (These shapes also recapitulate the curvilinear and erotic impulse of the waltz and of “Oriental” Spanish dancing.) Significantly, as Guy gradually relinquishes his autonomy and is drawn into Spirite’s transcendent sphere, it is not through her dancing, but her *writing*, and where thus the writing hand is substituted for the dancing foot, Gautier draws attention to Spirite’s “petite *main blanche*” (138, my emphasis). At the beginning of the novel, in accordance with his sombre mood, Guy attempts to write a note to Mme d’Ymbercourt declining her invitation to tea, but neither the words nor the handwriting belong to him. What was intended as “un joli petit mensonge social” (13) emerges on the page as a statement of ideals written in a hand whose aspect Guy describes as not only “plus élégant, plus svelte,” but also “plus féminin” (33) than his. This loss of agency is complete when, through Guy, Spirite writes her autobiography. In her “Dictée,” she literally guides Guy’s hand, and where “A sa pensée s’était substituée celle de Spirite” (139), writing expresses a merging with the ideal:

il lui sembla que le sentiment de sa personnalité le quittait, que ses souvenirs individuels s’effaçaient comme ceux d’un rêve confus, et que ses idées s’en allaient hors de vue, comme ces oiseaux qui se perdent dans le ciel. Quoique son corps fût toujours près de la table, ... Guy intérieurement était absent, évanoui, disparu. Un autre âme, ou du moins une autre pensée se substituait à la sienne et commandait à ces serviteurs qui, pour agir, attendent l’ordre du maître inconnu. Les nerfs de ses doigts tressaillirent et commencèrent à

exécuter des mouvements dont il n'avait pas la conscience, et le bec de la plume se mit à courir sur le papier, traçant des signes rapides avec l'écriture de Guy légèrement modifiée par une impulsion étrangère. (97-8)

Absorbed into Spirite's being, Guy relinquishes his subjectivity, and his writing, in a "real" sense, is drawn from her as its source. Thus Grisi/Spirite, the object of desire who embodies transcendent beauty and the quasi-mystical essence of art, is also art's wellspring.

Towards the end of *Spirite*, Guy literally journeys, like the migratory birds in "Ce que disent les Hirondelles," from the Occidental winter to the Oriental spring: he travels by boat to Greece. Where this journey is also a symbolic movement from darkness to light, and from death-in-life to life-in-death, it is one initiated by, and culminating in, a fusion with the feminine. Significantly, just as Paul's suicide in *Jettatura* is by drowning in the sea, so Guy's ultimate death and transfiguration are expedited by the sea. In *Jettatura*, the sea is a metaphor for the dangerous, overwhelming power of the unconscious; in *Spirite*, it also represents transcendent art, free from, and unsullied by, the stock and trade of contemporary bourgeois life:

Comme lord Byron, ... [Guy] aimait la mer.... Ce qui le charmait surtout de la mer, c'était le vaste isolement, le cercle d'horizon toujours semblable et toujours déplacé ... et l'absence de tout signe de civilisation. La même houle qui soulevait le bateau à vapeur dans sa large ondulation avait lavé les flancs des vaisseaux "aux flancs creux" dont parle Homère, et il ne lui en restait aucune trace.... Dans sa fierté, la mer ne garde pas comme la terre les

cicatrices du passage de l'homme. Elle est vague, immense et profonde
comme l'infini. (213-14)

The sea erases all traces of “masculine” civilisation, symbolically purifying Guy as it transports him (in both senses of the word) to his ultimate, union with (dis)embodied Spirite and into the realm of *jouissance*.

When Guy dies in the “Oriental” (therefore “uncivilised”) landscape of Classical Greece, and is united with Spirite, dichotomies merge, and paradoxes are resolved. Indeed, Guy's Platonic union with Spirite—according to Aristophanes' myth, the *reunion* of separated halves—is also a subject/object merging. Earlier Spirite has promised him that

il nous sera permis de savourer, unis éternellement l'un à l'autre, la tranquille
ivresse de l'amour divin.... Nous serons l'unité dans la dualité, le moi dans le
non-moi, le mouvement dans le repos, le désir dans l'accomplissement, la
fraîcheur dans la flamme. (216)

In the penultimate paragraph of the novel, Gautier writes, “[Malivert et de Spirite] ... volaient l'un près de l'autre, dans une joie céleste et radieuse, se caressant du bout de leurs ailes, se luttant avec de divines agaceries.” And, finally, “Bientôt ils se rapprochèrent de plus en plus et comme deux gouttes de rosée roulant sur la même feuille de lis, ils finirent par se confondre dans une perle unique” (234).

Above all, *Spirite* is a metaphor for the yearning of the Romantic writer to merge with the transcendent art he strives to create; here, Gautier actualises the blissful union he withheld from Giselle and Albrecht in his earlier ballet. The supra-terrestrial flight and merging that close the story are the fulfilment of the Romantic poet's yearning for escape

from a utilitarian world, and union with ideal beauty. Like Guy (and Achmet in *La Péri*), he ecstatically flies to his “patrie de l’âme.” In a sense, Gautier stages himself: united with the chastely erotic dancer-as-art, he floats free in the world of dreams beyond the “étincelante ligne de feu.”

Chapter 3

Arthur Symons and the Eroticised Dancer

“What’s the use of being human?”

By 1865, the year in which Gautier wrote *Spirite*, the heyday of French Romantic ballet had passed. *La Sylphide* had last been performed at the Paris Opéra in 1860, and of the ballets for which Gautier had written the scenario, only *Giselle* remained in the repertoire; the rest had faded into oblivion, and although initially successful, *La Péri* had survived only ten years.¹ Taglioni had given her final performance at the Opéra in 1844; Elssler had not appeared there since 1840; Cerrito had departed for Russia in 1854; and Gautier’s beloved Carlotta retired in 1854.² Finally, in 1863, Emma Livry, the young dancer seen as a second Taglioni, had died from burns suffered when her costume caught fire in rehearsal, the flames that killed her destroying all hope of a Romantic

¹ The original choreography for *La Sylphide* was ultimately forgotten; the surviving version is by the nineteenth-century Danish choreographer August Bournonville. Other ballets for which Gautier wrote the scenario, *Gemma*, *Pâquerette*, *Yanko le Bandit*, and *Sacountala*, were even shorter-lived than *La Péri*. Only *Giselle* survives in a form close to the original. Throughout the nineteenth century it continued to be staged in Russia, with interpolations, including those by Fanny Elssler. It was not until 1910, when the *Ballets Russes* brought it to Paris, however, that *Giselle* reappeared in the West. For details of the fates of these and other of Jules Perrot’s work, see Ivor Guest, *Jules Perrot: Master of the Romantic Ballet* (London: Dance Books Ltd. 1984) 347-351. For a list of ballets performed at the Paris Opéra from 1832 to 1847 see Appendix B in Guest’s *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* 268-9.

² Elssler last performed on the Paris Opéra stage in 1840 and after continuing her career in the United States, Europe, Russia and England, retired in 1851. Grisi last performed at the Paris Opéra in 1849 before making her debut at the Bolshoi theatre in St. Petersburg in 1850. She performed in Russia for the next three years, and gave her final performance in 1854 in Warsaw.

revival. Ballet was still popular, but its decline as a serious art form had already begun, and continued unchecked. By the time of Gautier's death in 1872, ballet had largely degenerated into what he abhorred: facile entertainment pitched to bourgeois taste and little more than a vehicle for dancers' self-conscious display of their physical attributes or technical prowess.³

Romantic ballet's decline—what some defined as a slide from “high art” into “decadence”—was even more pronounced in London.⁴ From the eighteen-sixties onwards, ballet gradually disappeared from the theatres that staged “high” art and by the 1880s was thriving only as light entertainment in the music halls.⁵ Presented at London's prime music-hall locations, the Alhambra and the Empire theatres, alongside comic turns, vocal recitals, acrobatics, and other variety acts, ballet was staged as spectacles that had few pretensions to serious art. These ballet spectacles featured huge female casts of up to two hundred highly drilled, but minimally trained dancers, invariably dressed in sumptuous and titillating costumes (including women *en travesti*); numerous, generically defined dance “items” set to unremarkable music; and elaborate scenery and

³ For an account of Romantic ballet's decline, see Chapter 10, “The Close of the Golden Age” in Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (London: Pitman, 1966) 246-63.

⁴ By 1847, there was a perceptible shift in public taste away from Romantic ballet, but what sealed its fate in London was the arrival of an exciting new phenomenon in the form of “The Swedish Nightingale,” Jenny Lind, who made her debut in London in 1847. In his *Reminiscences of the Opera*, Benjamin Lumley, the director of Her Majesty's Theatre, wrote “the ballet was no longer the ‘town talk.’ The ungrateful town could find tongue for one object—Jenny Lind” (qtd. in *Ésd*, n. 2, 233). For an unflattering but amusing account of English ballet by the costume designer William Pitcher (known as “C. Wilhelm”), see Russell Jackson (ed.) *Victorian Theatre* (London: A. and C. Black, 1989) 227-34.

⁵ After 1847, ballet continued to be performed at Her Majesty's Theatre and The Royal Opera House, but later became established as part of the variety programmes in the two main music halls, the Alhambra and the Empire. The Alhambra opened in 1854 as the “Panopticon of the Arts and Science,” taking its familiar name in 1870 when it became a music hall. The Empire opened much later, in 1884, and began operating as a music hall in 1887. See Guest, *Ballet in Leicester Square: The Alhambra and the Empire 1860-1915* (London: Dance Books, 1992).

mechanised special effects.⁶ Among the ballets staged at the Alhambra, for example, was *Chicago* (1893), the “Pantomimic Ballet” featuring music from “Popular and National Airs” with such numbers as the “Indian Nautch Dance,” the “German Valse,” the “American Plantation Dance,” and the “Comic Mashers’ Dance.” Also staged at the Alhambra was *Titania* (1895), a ballet loosely based on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Described as a “Grand Spectacular Ballet in Five Tableaux,” and comprising twenty-six scenes, of which the eighteenth starred “the Celebrated Mdlle. GRIGOLATIS with her AERIAL BALLET” aided by “Machinery invented by Herr Zschiegner,” *Titania* was clearly staged for its novelty value.⁷ Furthermore, as publicity photographs in *The Sketch* dated August 14, 1895 show, not the least of the attractions of *Titania* were its troupes of alluring fairies costumed in thigh-revealing draped dresses, and buxom *coryphées*, bootshod and corseted as “Attendants on Hippolyta.”⁸

Less aerial in theme, but no less crammed with variety turns and seductively dressed women, were the jingoistic ballets that celebrated Imperial power. *Le Bivouac*

⁶ Some of the music-hall ballets were not without merit, especially those staged by Katti Lanner in the early 1900s. Although the music halls presented highly-trained soloists—usually Italian or French—in leading roles, most of the dancers in the *corps de ballet* were barely competent, but since their function was to move *en masse* in various formations, often while carrying suitable props, the demands on their technique were minimal. See Guest, *Ballet*. See also Alexandra Carter, “Blonde, Bewigged and Winged with Gold: Ballet Girls in the Music Halls of Late Victorian and Edwardian England,” *Dance Research Journal* 13.2 (1995): 28-46.

⁷ Programme, Alhambra Theatre Box, 1895, Theatre Museum, London. Multiple acts and scenes were also typical of the narrative ballets of the Romantic period, as was the use of stage machinery for “flying” dancers. It can thus be argued that, in terms of staging, the difference between ballet as “high” art and as popular culture was minimal, or that, in fact, Romantic ballet *was* popular culture. This is a matter for debate, especially because Romantic ballet’s commercial viability in both France and England relied to a large degree on its appeal to middle-class (male) audiences. The difference lies, perhaps, in intent. Romantic ballets were arguably “high” art because they expressed the Romantic aesthetic, whereas the late nineteenth-century ballets were staged largely for effect.

⁸ Programme, Alhambra Theatre Box, 1895, Theatre Museum, London.

(1885) and *Our Army and Navy* (1889) featured battalions of women *en travesti* in military uniforms, and *Round the Town* (1892) presented “the daughters of the British Empire” (including those from New Zealand) suitably attired in “national” dress. Other ballets, more prosaic in theme, were based on topical events, and celebrated the might of capitalism and commercial progress: in 1898, the Empire presented *Alaska* and *The Press*, the former inspired by the Klondyke gold-rush, and the latter by the might of the newspaper industry. If *The Press* demonstrated what John Stokes terms “the energy of *laissez-faire* production,” it was energy made seductive by its personifiers: dressed in suitably titillating costumes, the dancers personified numerous newspapers and magazines—*The Sketch*, *The Daily Mail*, *Punch* and *Westminster Gazette*, for example—and the *corps de ballet* represented, among other things, “Printers’ Devils, Typewriters, War Correspondents, [and] Special Artists.” As a poster shows, at least one dancer was dressed in a skirt made of slivered newspaper banners that parted over her left thigh to reveal a garter also suitably made of “newsprint.”⁹

At first, it seems odd that inane spectacles such as these—and, in the case of *The Press*, one that blatantly celebrated bourgeois values—compulsively drew to the music hall the writer responsible for introducing French Symbolist poetry to his compatriots. Yet the ballets staged at the Empire and the Alhambra theatres inspired Arthur Symonds not only to superlatives as a reviewer (he wrote of *The Press* that it was “one of the most original, fantastic, intricate and amusing ballets which even the Empire has ever given”),

⁹ That music-hall ballets functioned as propaganda for British capitalist and imperialist values is a fascinating—and largely unexplored—field of study, and beyond the scope of this thesis. It is worth noting, however, that a number of ballets at both the Alhambra and the Empire were staged to stimulate jingoistic fervour. For a general account of the repertoires of both theatres, see Guest, *Ballet in Leicester Square* (London: Dance Books, 1992).

but also to metaphysical abstractions as an aesthete.¹⁰ In fact, on one level, Symons enjoyed music-hall ballet of the 1890s no less than Gautier enjoyed Romantic ballet at its apogee; like Gautier, he went to the ballet to escape from the banality and mediocrity of everyday life. As Symons puts it in his review of *Titania* in the *Sketch* for August 7, 1895, “I go to see a ballet in order to get as far as possible from the intolerable reality of the world around me” (qtd. in Ellis 170). Even more to the point, Symons went to the music hall “for that air of Bohemian freedom, that relief from respectability which one gets here, and nowhere more surely than here” (*CSI* 145). For Symons, the *fin-de-siècle* writer, as for Gautier the high priest of *l’art pour l’art*, the dancer embodied freedom not only from prevailing bourgeois values, but also from a hidebound literary tradition.¹¹

There are differences, however, in both degree and kind between the impulses and motivations that shaped the two writers’ images of dancers. For Gautier, the distinctions between “high” art and popular culture were subsumed under *l’art pour l’art*, and only when the dancer displayed an “Oriental” freedom from academicism and bourgeois repression was her eroticism transmuted as “chaste” art. Symons, however, found *all* dancers erotic, especially those who subtly, or not so subtly, displayed their sexual charms to arouse the audience—the various skirt-dancers, serpentine dancers, and cancan dancers who performed in the Parisian café concert as well as in the London music hall. Less discerning than Gautier, Symons was just as attracted to the *corps de*

¹⁰ Symons’s comments appeared in a review of *The Press* that appeared in *The Star*, February 15, 1898. Qtd. in *ITN* xvi.

¹¹ In fact, the Alhambra and Empire theatres became increasingly acceptable as venues for middle-class audiences. Hence Symons did not confine himself to going to the more respectable theatres; he also frequented the seedier Metropolitan in Edgeware Road. See *ITN* 89.

ballet dancer as he was to the considerably more competent solo performer.¹² In fact, many of the dancers who inspired Symons were from the *corps de ballet*, their appeal heightened by their working-class origins and his belief that they were morally lax. For example, when Katherine Willard, the young American woman with whom he corresponded over a five-year period, and to whom he dedicated his volume of poems *Silhouettes*, expressed her wish to embark upon an acting career, he was horrified. He wrote back to her saying that, whereas he used to think it was Puritan prejudice to consider theatre people immoral, he had discovered from experience that, in fact, “They *are*, as a class, more uniformly immoral than any other class of people” (*ASSL* 90-91, Symons’s emphasis).

For Symons—as for a number of *fin-de-siècle* writers—going to the music hall was in itself to defy Victorian middle-class morality. Although the Alhambra and Empire theatres were venues for popular culture, they attracted many bourgeois and upper-class men precisely because they displayed “loose” women, not just upon the stage, but also along the promenades that ran the length of their dress-circles. Here, much to the disgust of moral reformers, yet another type of sumptuously dressed and “painted” woman made her living by her body: the high-class prostitute. During the autumn of 1894, Mrs. Ormiston Chant of the Britishwoman’s Temperance Association launched a campaign to have the theatre’s licence revoked. At the very least, she wished to have the promenade, a venue in the theatre where prostitutes plied their trade, closed

¹² Unlike Gautier, Symons makes no comment about ballet dancers’ thinness. That music-hall *corps de ballet* women *were* thin, like their earlier Paris Opéra counterparts, is shown by Thomas Hardy’s remarks. After a visit to the Empire in 1892, he writes, “The dancing girls are nearly all skeletons. ... They should be penned and fattened for a month to round their beauty” (qtd. in *ITN* 61).



How's that
FOR HIGH?



Fig. 9. Cyrene at the Alhambra.

down. Symons burst into print denying that he had ever seen any man in the Promenade accosted by prostitutes. In his letter to the editor, published on October 15, in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he writes, “I have visited the Empire on an average about once a week for the last year or two in my function as a critic for several newspapers, and I must say I have never in a single instance been accosted by a woman” (3). He then goes on to argue that prostitution is a reality of life and one best accommodated.¹³

If the appeal of the Empire was, in part, for Symons, the opportunity to observe the “depraved” women that flocked there, for the same reason, from the time of his first visit to Paris in 1889, he was drawn to the febrile world of the café concert. There he could see the *chahut*, or cancan—the “mad Bacchic dance of modern Paris” (*Sketch* April 5, 1893, 608)—performed by women also outside the bounds of middle-class society, dancers such as La Goulue, La Mélinite, Grille d’Égout, and the appropriately named Nini Patte-en-l’air. Significantly, La Mélinite, whom he describes as dressed in “Oriental fashion,” is “feverish ... perverse,” and with an air of “depraved virginity” (TD 30-31); and he sums up Nini Patte-en-l’air as “the Maenad of the Decadence” (TD 31).

Like Gautier, Symons was attracted to all forms of “exotic” dancing for its erotic charge. In his article on the American cancan dancer Cyrene, he refers to her “decidedly Spanish” complexion, thereby signalling her “Oriental” status and, by implication, her sexual availability. Even more graphically, he heightens Cyrene’s erotic power in transposed images of male arousal, writing that when she dances her “skirts and petticoats ... fly out, mount till at right angles to her body, then higher, and the long,

¹³ For details of Mrs. Ormiston Chant’s campaign, and responses to it, see *ITN* 54-61.

lithe, flaming-red limbs appear, and are shown in all their length.” And in terms reminiscent of Gautier’s depiction of Petra Cámara, Symons remarks that Cyrene turns “like the Nâbis (the dancing dervishes ...)” (*Sketch* April 5, 1893, 608). Earlier, on his 1889 visit to Paris with Havelock Ellis, Symons responded in a similarly Gautierien way to the Turkish dancing they saw. In a letter to his mentor, J. Dykes Campbell, he writes, “We are now competent to instruct all and sundry on the whole form and order of the Danse du Ventre—really a most wonderful performance, unlike anything European bodies ever achieved” (qtd. in Beckson 51). (In Symons’s group of poems *Studies in Strange Sins*, published thirty-one years later, the *danse du ventre* reappeared as Salome’s dance of seduction.) More immediately, the Javanese dancers Symons also saw with Ellis inspired the poem entitled “Javanese Dancers” that he wrote that same year and which Karl Beckson considers among Symons’s “finest” (Beckson 51).

Typical of the period, Symons’s writing on dancers (especially that on Lydia, the “Spanish” dancer with whom he had a prolonged and passionate affair) inseparably links the dancer’s exotic status with the concept of the *femme fatale*. With her precedent in not only Keats’s Lamia, and Shelley’s Medusa, but also Gautier’s Cléopâtre, and the even more sinister Salomés of French *Symboliste/Décadent* writers such as Mallarmé, Laforgue and Huysmans, Symons’s concept of the *femme fatale* is shaped by prevailing attitudes to race, class and gender, and supercharged by the power of literary “authority.”

There is an important distinction to be made, however, between the fatal woman as depicted by Gautier, the earlier French exponent of *l’art pour l’art*, and Symons, the *fin-de-siècle* English advocate of Symbolism. Although Gautier usually retains the

subject/object division through his protagonist's reaffirmation as the detached viewer, he nonetheless desires a metaphysical Platonic merging with the erotic, dancing Other that is celebratory and transcendent—the fantasy realisation that occurs in *Spirite*. Symons, on the other hand, seems to posit a merging with the erotic dancer as an act of self-definition that is almost entirely narcissistic. While the Romantic proponent of *l'art pour l'art* desires metaphysical union with erotic art as a “chaste” ideal, the *fin-de-siècle* poet desires self-verification from art that is erotic for its own sake. Arguably, Symons's self-aware, self-*observing*, plunge into the febrile, “low-life” world of “depraved” women and popular culture contributed to the real collapse of identity that occurred with the onset of his madness in 1908. Accordingly, Symons seems to personify the ultimate nihilism of *l'art pour l'art*: art as idealised beauty removed from the common sphere becomes art that serves nothing but the artist's self-gratification, and thus has nothing coherent to say.

It is tempting to conclude that the differences in response between Gautier and Symons are culturally and nationally based: Gautier is an ebullient southern French Romantic, and Symons a repressed English Victorian. (In fact, Symons was the son of a Welsh Non-Conformist minister.) This is, in part, a valid conclusion; the pleasure Symons obtained from watching dancers was highly charged by his sense of the forbidden. As his *Memoirs* show, Symons's casual liaisons with sundry “Ballet Girls,” and his prolonged and stormy relationship with the dancer Lydia, in particular, are vehicles for his self-dramatisation as a reformed sinner.

Joan Scanlon and Richard Kerridge argue that for the Romantic male “contemplating dance ... is an exemplary activity” (32). This is because his identity is unstable:

boundaries cannot be drawn between the self and the rest of the world, yet the self-consciousness which makes such a recognition possible also sets the individual apart from the organic whole. A characteristic romantic experience is that of watching from the outside while desiring reabsorption.

(32)

Detached (and safe), therefore, the viewer sees before him a

realisation of the complete integrity of mind and body. There is no seeming delay between thought and action, but an exquisite freedom from that state of indecision characteristic of the estranged mind. (32)

Symons, however, does not enjoy a sense of freedom, least of all an “exquisite” one, and although he posits their synthesis, he actually reinforces the mind/body division. For him, the dancer ultimately represents the mind and body as irreconcilable. Moreover, as Kerry Powell suggests, Decadent writers sought refuge from reality in the cultivation of “hothouse beauty and bizarre sensations” because they were disillusioned with Romantic idealism; and if, for them, “the symbol does not finally express an ineffable and benign spiritual reality ... [it] provides an avenue of escape from a world darker and more foreboding than most Romantic authors ever conceived” (157). On one level, this is true of Symons because, for him, the dancer *is* a symbol for the “spiritual reality” of symbolic language; but because she physically belongs to the erotic world of

low culture, he effectively escapes not from, but *into* the dark and foreboding realm of woman, a realm made deeply threatening by the late-nineteenth-century crisis of gender.

It is important to consider that Symons lived through a time in which fears about the blurring of gender roles, and a perceived general moral decline were fuelled by the increasing visibility of the sexual “invert” and the brazen new woman.¹⁴ These fears were inflamed by the appearance, in 1895, of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* with its almost hysterical attack on *fin-de-siècle* decadence—in particular that of the writer and artist—and its dire warnings of civilisation’s imminent collapse.¹⁵ The Wilde trials may suggest these fears were peculiarly English, but, in late nineteenth-century France, discourses on woman’s essential corruptness, her infantile, and inferior, intellectual capacity and her tendency to madness were rife, and Symons reflects, and perpetuates, the misogyny of both French and English literary traditions.

Nonetheless, for Gautier, the seemingly irreconcilable opposition between the dancer’s transcendent art and her erotic appeal as a flesh and blood woman who displays her body upon the stage is resolved by his belief in the “chasteness” of an “authentic” eroticism that is the essence of pure beauty. Symons’s view of the dancer as essentially corrupt reflects his anxiety about the absence, or loss of what it is, in terms of bourgeois constructs, to be “masculine” and “rational,” or, more specifically, “human.” Thus

¹⁴ See Showalter.

¹⁵ Nordau’s book *Degeneration* was extremely influential, and, in turn, was influenced by the early Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, among others. Nordau also had earlier published *Paradoxes* (1885), a book highly misogynistic in its “proof” of the innate differences between man and woman, the latter’s devolutionary tendencies, and her predisposition to depravity. Such views were seen as “proven” by the pseudo-scientific theory of phrenology. It is relevant to consider that Freud developed his theories after spending time at La Salpêtrière, the asylum in Paris where the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot conducted his “research” into female hysteria. Here sufferers were displayed and photographed in the name of “science.” See Anthea Callen, 50-59.

Symons's view of the dancer differs radically from Gautier's. Gautier ultimately sees the erotic dancer as a spiritualised symbol for art that initiates a celebratory release from the rational, material self, whereas Symons sees her dualistically as body *and* art, and even then struggles to sustain the latter view. And because he never escapes from his own polarised identity, his responses to the dancer are ambiguous; as he puts it in the *Sketch* dated October 3, 1894, "Lovers of the ballet become amateurs for many reasons: from abstract interest in dancing, [and] from concrete interest in dancers" (557). Where Gautier has a singular gaze that transfixes the dancer as art that is "concrete" in the sense that it has a tangible, yet transcendent beauty, Symons highlights the ambiguity and *intangibility* of art that is self-consciously "symbolic." Moreover, while Gautier seeks to transcend the ego in the service of art, Symons sees art as a vehicle for the ego; the dancer represents the power of art to aestheticise the self—the poet's ability to make something of himself—while she also threatens a terrifying emasculation and dissolution of the self. Thus, Symons's view of the dancer is inextricably bound to his narcissistic self-observation as a writer and aesthete. Indeed, she is the mirror into which Symons solipsistically gazes in order to see a reflection of himself as poet and aesthete.

The period during which Symons wrote about the dancers he saw at the London music halls and at the café concerts in Paris was relatively brief and falls mostly within what Tom Gibbons defines as his middle, or symbolist phase, between about 1893 and about 1900 (Gibbons 69). In 1898—the year that he reviewed the ballet *The Press*, and a year before he published his influential work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*—Symons penned an essay that can be seen as much a touchstone for his symbolist aesthetic as Gautier's preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is a manifesto for

l'art pour l'art. Entitled “The World as Ballet,” this essay reveals how, on what he terms the “abstract” level, Symons’s responses to dance are similar to Gautier’s and were shaped by Gautier’s literary heirs, the French *Symboliste/Décadent* writers.¹⁶ Here Symons articulates his view of *dance* (he predominantly replaces the title word “Ballet” with the wider term) as a symbol for both life, and life made “artificial” by art, what he defines as “shadowy and real life” (246).

The distinction seems ambiguous, but, in fact, Symons posits the dancer as both life and art because she is both woman dancing, and a symbol of art that *represents* woman dancing; and, as such, she is “Humanity, youth, beauty, playing the part of itself,” and “more natural than nature, more artificial than art” (*CW* 8: 244). Throughout “The World as Ballet,” however, Symons represents dance as instinctual, thereby expressing and symbolising the surrender in “real,” and “artificial,” life to unrestrained sexual drives. In the first paragraph, he states quite simply, “The dance is life, animal life, having its own way passionately” (*CW* 8: 244), and later he writes, “From the first [dance] has mimed the instincts,” and “How fitly then, in its very essence, does the art of dancing symbolise life; and so faithful a rendering of its actual instincts!” (245). Furthermore, dance “is always going over and over the eternal pantomime of love; it can be all the passions, and all the languors” (244). The waltz, in particular, has a “really primitive feeling,” and reveals “the very pattern and symbol of earthly love” (245).

These remarks are close to Gautier’s belief that “La danse ... n’exprime que des passions: l’amour, le désir avec toutes ses coquetteries” (*Ésd* 42), and they show that Symons, like the earlier writer, sees dance as a symbol for art that is essentially anti-

¹⁶ Symons originally published the work as an essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature” in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893.

Puritan and anti-bourgeois. And Symons, like Gautier, sees a connection between dance and “Oriental” eroticism: he describes Spanish dance as “Eastern ... from the Moors” and “of the whole body” (*Cities* 153), and its performance by four women in a Spanish music hall as having “a sort of lascivious suggestiveness, a morbid, perverse charm” (153). Accordingly, Symons makes the dancer a touchstone for his self-definition as an aesthete liberated from repressive sexual morality, stating that “The abstract thinker, to whom the question of practical morality is indifferent, has always loved dancing, as naturally as the moralist has hated it” (244). Dramatising his position, he goes on to say that because it is both “real” life, and a symbol of life, dance is “doubly nature,” and to the moralist, “doubly sinful” (244). Unsurprisingly, given the dance’s continued notoriety as a loosener of morals, Symons illustrates his point by referring to the waltz. “A waltz, in a drawing room,” he states,

takes us suddenly out of all that convention, away from those guardians of our order who sit around walls, approvingly, unconsciously; in its winding motion it raises an invisible wall about us, shutting us off from the whole world, in with ourselves; in its fatal rhythm, never beginning or ending, slow, insinuating, gathering impetus which must be held back, which must rise into the blood, [the waltz] tells us that life flows even as that, so passionately and so easily and so inevitably.... Here is nature ... hurried violently, deliberately to boiling point. (245)

Here Symons identifies with the dancer, for whom, like Gautier’s protagonist in “La Cafetière,” to waltz is to become sexually aroused. Put another way, the waltz is a metaphor for sexual arousal, and in pulse and impulse, flouts bourgeois Puritanism and

authority, personified graphically as static figures ranged against enclosing walls. By contrast, the dancer/writer is immured *from* social restraint, and is constantly poised on the ebb and flow of primal instinct.

Accordingly, Symons actually sees dance as expressing the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian impulse, and, by extension, the idea of the artist as *Übermensch*.¹⁷ In fact, Symons explores the German philosopher's ideas on art in two essays—"Nietzsche on Tragedy" and "Nietzsche's Apostasy in Music"—and they are featured in a number of his other critical works. "No one can think, and escape Nietzsche," Symons writes in the opening paragraph of the introduction to his work on William Blake (*Blake* 1), whom he then goes on to define as a proto-Nietzschean, an honour he also extends, in his essay "Nietzsche on Tragedy," to Walter Pater.¹⁸

Although Symons's writings on Nietzsche post-date "The World as Ballet," it is obvious that at its time of writing, in 1898, he was already influenced by Nietzsche's ideas:

Part of that natural madness which men were wise enough to include in religion, [dance] began with the worship of the disturbing deities, the gods of ecstasy, for whom wantonness and wine, and all things in which energy passes into an ideal excess, were sacred. (244)

¹⁷ See *PAM* 17-21, 168-174. In his introduction to René le Sage's *The Devil on Two Sticks*, Symons writes of the Spanish playwright Calderón (whom he admired) that he "seems a prophecy of the *Uebermensch*" (*sic*) (ix). It is intriguing to note that *The Devil on Two Sticks* became the ballet *Le Diable boiteux* in which Fanny Elssler danced her famous *cachucha*.

¹⁸ Symons wrote "Nietzsche on Tragedy" in 1902, and it first appeared in the *Academy*, August 23, 1902, and "Nietzsche's Apostasy in Music" first appeared in the *Saturday Review*, October 19, 1907. Symons began work on *William Blake* in 1906. According to Beckson, Symons did not seriously read Nietzsche until 1902 (*ASL* 136). But as Beckson points out, in 1896, Havelock Ellis published in the *Savoy* three articles on Nietzsche, the third of which contained "a striking passage that most likely intrigued both Yeats and Symons" (*ASL* 144).

As Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “In the Dionysiac dithyramb, man’s symbolic faculties are roused to their supreme intensity” (*TBT* 21). Ideas such as these clearly influenced Symons’s view that dance was an expression of impulses that, if not specifically pagan, were most certainly anti-Puritan. For instance, he proclaims that “[dance] was cast out of religion when religion cast out nature; for, like nature itself, it is a thing of evil to those who renounce instincts” (244).

Like Gautier, Symons elevated art to a quasi-religious status not just in defiance of middle-class sexual morality, but also as a bastion against nineteenth-century materialism.¹⁹ In fact, Symons’s essays in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* on the French writers he admired are rich in references to the mystical source and power of Symbolist art, and to the religious, or spiritual attitudes that defined his subjects’ hypersensitivity and moral superiority. Gérard de Nerval, for example,

had divined, before all the world, that poetry should be a miracle; not a hymn to beauty, nor the description of beauty, nor beauty’s mirror; but beauty itself, the colour, fragrance, and form of the imagined flower, as it blossoms again on the page. Vision, the over-powering vision, had come to him beyond, if not against his will; and he knew that vision is the root out of which the flower must grow. Vision had taught him symbol, and he knew that it is by symbol alone that the flower can take visible form. He knew that

¹⁹ A number of Symbolist writers and artists, including J.-K. Huysmans and Aubrey Beardsley, converted to Catholicism, and were no doubt attracted to its ritual and symbolism. It is not insignificant that a French movement that sought to raise art to quasi-divine status was paralleled, in England, by another, albeit less influential and more idiosyncratic. In 1879, the Rev. Stewart Headlam, a Fabian socialist, had founded the Church and Stage Guild with the aim of promoting ballet dancing as more than just a respectable activity, indeed a “form of poetry” of aesthetic and spiritual importance. With this conviction came his belief that the dancing body was a temple of the Holy Ghost.

the whole mystery of beauty can never be comprehended by the crowd. (*CW* 8: 121).

In his essay on Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Symons writes of his subject's Catholicism, his preoccupation with the occult (125), and of the artist's role in building an ideal world beyond the reach of science (127). And the focus of "Maeterlinck as a Mystic" is obvious from its title (198-213). By contrast, Symons states that Mallarmé "was not a mystic" (185); nonetheless, he proclaims that "it is on the lines of that spiritualising of the word, ... that confidence in the eternal correspondences between the visible and invisible universe, which Mallarmé taught, ... that literature must now move" (186).

Because Symons's essays in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* are less analyses of poetry than hyperbolic portraits of poets, they show that Symons sees Symbolist poetry, in a kind of infinite spiral, as the expression, and the cause, of the poet's quasi-spiritual hypersensitivity. If dance symbolises the "natural madness that men were wise enough to include in religion" (TWB 244), the essence of dance (and the dancer) is also the essence of the Symbolist poet. In his essay on Verlaine, for example, Symons represents a kind of mystical union between the Symbolist poet and his "spiritual" poetry in language that recalls his images of the dancer and the dance. Symons cites Verlaine's words "*J'ai la fureur d'aimer*" (156, Symons's emphasis) from his poem "La Bonne Chanson" as evidence for the "admirable, and supremely dangerous, quality ... at the root of Verlaine's nature" (156-57). This "quality" makes Verlaine "Instinctive, unreasoning ... entirely at the mercy of emotion or impression which, for the moment, had seized upon him, ... the most imperious of instincts, of passions, and of intoxications" (157), and ultimately takes the form of religious

fanaticism. In Symons's words, Verlaine "realised the great secret of the Christian mystic: that it is possible to love God with an extravagance of the whole being," and when he converted to Catholicism, he did so "feverishly," and with "abandonment" (160). This was because,

He had not, like others ... to despoil his nature of its pride, to conquer his intellect before he could become *l'enfant vêtu de laine et d'innocence*....

[A]ll that was ardent, impulsive, indomitable in him burst at once into a flame of adoration. (159-60)

Symons suggests, not that the poet *sees* more (as Gautier believes), but that he *feels* more, and that it is an almost unbridled emotionalism that defines him, both as an individual living on the margins of "normal" bourgeois life, and as a writer of Symbolist verse.

That Symons's hyperbole is a projection of his own tendency to overwroughtness, and that the qualities he attributes to Verlaine are similarly ascribed to dancers as evidence of their *deviancy*, I discuss later. For the moment, it is worth noting that Symons's idea that Symbolist poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's Dionysian, and *feminine* instinct is referred to obliquely in his essay "Modernity in Verse." In an attack on his bourgeois contemporaries, reminiscent of Gautier's in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Symons comments (also ironically), "I feel a bourgeois solemnity in much of the really quite good, the very respectable work in verse that is done nowadays." He then remarks,

Our fine craftsmen are aghast at passion, afraid of emotion, ashamed of frivolity; only anxious that the sentiment as well as the rhyme be right. It is the bourgeois, perhaps

I should say the genteel, point of view; poetry from the clubs for the clubs. I am inclined to believe that no good poetry was ever written in a club armchair. (*CW* 8: 52)

Nothing seems more antithetical to this last image of staid, static and hegemonic masculinity and its correlative, Victorian rhetoric, than the Dionysian dancer—the swirling waltzer, or the wild cancan dancer who flings up her skirts in the face of bourgeois morality and hidebound literary forms. In his essay on Verlaine, Symons actually borrows a more aggressive image, not for mocking, but for slaying Victorian rhetoric: he quotes Verlaine’s imperative that the poet “Take eloquence, and wring its neck!” (*CW* 8: 153). By eloquence, Symons means language that is used denotatively rather than connotatively; as he puts it in the introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, “What are words themselves, but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them ... ?” (99). In fact, Verlaine did “[show] by writing it, that French verse could be written without rhetoric” (153); in his poetry “the sense of hearing and the sense of sight are almost interchangeable” (155). Indeed, again to quote Symons, “There are poems of Verlaine which go as far as verse can go to become pure music, the voice of a bird with a human soul” (154). If here Symons recapitulates Pater’s idea that all art aspires to the condition of music, he also expresses Gautier’s prescient notion of synaesthesia according to which dance is “musique que l’on regarde” (*Ésd* 42).²⁰

²⁰ Symons was profoundly influenced by Walter Pater’s ideas, and he was familiar with Gautier’s works. Although he does not seem to have made any specific mention of Gautier’s writing on dance, he almost certainly would have known of Gautier’s ideas on the correspondences between art media. Moreover, like the French Symbolists, Symons was a passionate Wagnerite and he writes of Mallarmé that “he attains Wagner’s ideal, that ‘the most complete work of the poet should be that which, in its final achievement, becomes perfect music’ “ (*CW* 8: 80). As Martin Jay stresses, the Symbolists esteemed Wagner’s music for its direct appeal to the senses (Jay 176-8). Symons visited Bayreuth in 1897 where he saw *Parsifal*, and his admiration of Wagner is set out in his essay “The Ideas of Richard Wagner.” Here he summarises Wagner’s writing on art in *The Art-work of the Future* (1849) and *Opera and Drama* (1851).

As I show in the two previous chapters, Gautier saw the airborne dancing of the Romantic ballerina as a metaphor for the poet's unattainable ideal of transcendent, pure beauty. Similarly, Symons personifies poetry whose "very essence ... [is] to be unconscious of anything between its own moment of flight and the supreme beauty which it will never attain" (156). When he praises Verlaine's use of language for its elusiveness and multiple appeal to the senses, moreover, it is the words themselves he personifies as if they were indeed airborne dancers in a Romantic ballet:

[Verlaine] knows that words are living things ... which go their way without demanding of us the right to live. ... [W]ords become Ariel to him. ... They transform themselves for him into music, colour, and shadow; a disembodied music, diaphanous colours, luminous shadow. (154)

It is interesting, therefore, to compare this view of the living, musical nature of the language of poetry with another of Symons's descriptions of dance in "The World as Ballet":

And something in the particular elegance of the dance, the scenery; the avoidance of emphasis, the evasive turn of things; and above all, the intellectual as well as sensuous appeal of a living symbol, which can but reach the brain through the eyes, in the visual, concrete, imaginative way; has seemed to make the ballet concentrate in itself a good deal of the modern ideal in matters of artistic expression. Nothing is stated, there is no intrusion of words used for the irrelevant purpose of describing; a world rises before one, the picture lasts only long enough to have been there: and the dancer,

with her gesture, all pure symbol, evokes, from her mere beautiful motion,
idea, sensation, all that one ever need know of an event. (246)²¹

Symons shows that, because it *is* non-verbal and its signifiers visual, dance is the ideal symbol for words that transmute as “music, colour, and shadow.” Moreover, his emphasis (or, more appropriately, given the convoluted syntax, his de-emphasis) on the visual, yet fleeting qualities of dance indicates his own attempts at suggestion rather than description. Despite his complaint that Mallarmé wrote verse that became increasingly abstruse and unintelligible, Symons follows his own imperative: “Remember [Mallarmé’s] principle: that to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create” (*CW* 8: 182).

In the above quotation, Symons’s reference to dance’s “concrete” visibility can be described as a Freudian slip: the very real physical presence of the dancers, and his “concrete” interest in them—to which he refers elsewhere—briefly intrudes. Nonetheless, on the abstract level at least, this does not detract from Symons’s vision of the dancer as a symbol for art’s transience and mutability. Contrary to Gautier, Symons sees the essence of art, not in its permanence as a kind of Platonic form, but in its very mutability in time and space. As he puts it in “The World as Ballet,” dancers move “under changing lights, so human, so remote, so desirable, so evasive, coming and going to the sound of thin heady music ... they seem to sum up in themselves the appeal of everything in the world that is passing” (245). If evanescence is the essence of Symbolist art, the dancer as “all pure symbol” (246) signifies an elusive, ever-disappearing chain of

²¹ When Symons compares the acting of Eleonora Duse with Verlaine’s poetry, he writes that Duses’s art is “always suggestion, never statement, always a renunciation” and that

It comes into the movement of all the arts, as they seek to escape from the bondage of form, by a new, finer mastery of form, wrought outwards from within, not from without inwards. And it conquers almost the last obstacles, as it turns the one wholly external art, based upon mere imitation, existing upon the commonest terms of illusion, triumphing by exaggeration in an art wholly subtle almost spiritual, a suggestion, an evasion, a secrecy” (*CW* 9: 223).

signifiers (the *enchainement* or chain of steps) that dissolves boundaries between one art medium and another. In Symons's words:

If we may be allowed to look at art as something essentially independent of its material, however dependant (*sic*) of its own material each art may be, in a secondary sense, it will scarcely be logical to contend that the motionless and permanent creation of the sculptor in marble is, as art, more perfect than the same sculptor's modelling in snow, which motionless one moment, melts the next, or than that the dancer's harmonious succession of movements which we have not even time to realise individually before one is succeeded (*sic*) by another, and the whole has vanished from before our eyes. (*PAM* 251)

Or as he more succinctly puts it, "Art is concerned only with accomplishment, not with duration" (254).

In a sense, Symons personifies art, and in presenting the artist and art as one, pre-emptively Yeats's recognition that the dancer *is* the dance; if her fleeting movements are a symbol for art and life, she is also a symbol for life-as-art, thus dissolving the distinctions between subject and object, and between "shadowy and real life" (246).

While Symons's language suggests an incipient Platonism—that life *is* a "shadowy" version of ultimate reality—he also reveals the influence on his aesthetic of the *theatrum mundi* tradition; as the title of his essay suggests, for Symons, the world *is* a stage. This is precisely what he says towards the end of "The World as Ballet" where he asserts the artist's need to create art and thereby re-create himself:

Realising all humanity to be but a masque of shadows, and this solid world
 an impromptu stage as temporary ... it is with a pathetic desire for some last
 illusion, which shall deceive even ourselves, that we are consumed with this
 hunger to create, to make something of ourselves, of at least the same
 shadowy reality as that about us. (246)

Clearly, Symons sees creativity and self-definition as a buttress against death, and this can be verified further by reference to his conclusion to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* where he writes, "all our lives are spent in busily forgetting death. ... [W]e find our escape from its sterile, annihilating reality in many dreams, in religion, passion, art; each a forgetfulness, each a symbol of creation" (*CW* 8: 249).²²

Yet, as Symons sets out in "A Paradox on Art," the essence of art is in its fleeting nature; "true" art de-composes into non-existence; its evanescence is like the violin playing of Ysaye, the orchestral music produced under the baton of Richter, or, significantly, the beauty of a dance "performed faultlessly and by a dancer of temperament" (*PAM* 252). Moreover, all are analogous to the "normalcy" of a beautiful, young woman's premature death:

that ... art should be fragile, evanescent, leaving only a memory which can
 never be realised again, is as pathetic and natural as that a beautiful woman

²² Symons's preoccupation with death is consistent with his self-image as a *fin-de-siècle* artist and aesthete, since early death had been the fate of a number of the French Symbolist poets he admired. De Nerval had committed suicide at the age of forty-seven, Rimbaud died at the age of thirty-seven, Baudelaire at thirty-six, Laforgue at twenty-seven. Moreover, as John Stokes demonstrates, the late nineteenth century was notable for a fascination with death, and a purportedly high rate of suicide. See *ITN* "Tired of Life," 116-43. Interestingly, Stokes cites the poem Symons wrote referring to his visit, in 1894, to the Paris morgue, wherein he "turned his own favourite theatrical motif, the space between the stage and wings, into a grim cosmic irony" (136). The poem is entitled "At the Morgue," and in the final stanza, Symons writes "Ah mortal to mere mortal breath, / This ultimate farce of things: / To have heard the laughter from the wings, / The coulisses of the comedy of death" (*CW* 3: 36).

should die young. To the actor, the dancer, the same fate is reserved. They work for the instant, and for the memory of the living. (253)

The sexism is disturbing, and it is worth recalling Gautier's notion that, in death, beauty—personified in the dancer—achieves the status of immortal, transcendent art. Indeed, in an essay Symons wrote on Gautier, he suggests that the French writer's extreme dread of "the soiling and displacing touch of death" (*CW* 8: 217) formed the basis of his passion for beauty. Symons proclaims art's transience, however, as an extension of the spectator/writer's subjective experience. (As I show later, Symons delights in replaying the ballet images recorded in his memory.)

But in positing art as predicated on the "death" of the performer, Symons also shows that he is haunted by death in more than just the physical sense. On one level, he implies that the performer (*or writer*) has no existence beyond his or her role, but on another, because the dancer is one with her art—the symbol of "real" life's Dionysian impulses—Symons also implies the lack of agency that, paradoxically, is the plight of one who creates symbolic art. Just as the dancer *is* the dance, so the Symbolist artist himself is fleeting, insubstantial and allusive art. Throughout *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Symons ascribes, not a lack of agency *per se* to a number of Symbolist writers, but certainly an absence of autonomy, or stable, fixed identity, that parallels the impressionism and evasion of fixed meaning he admires in their mode of expression. For example, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam is "outside humanity" (132) and "content to lose his way in the material world" (136); Verlaine "was completely at the mercy of the most imperious of instincts, of passions, and of intoxications" (157); and De Nerval, he describes as "Wavering ... now audacious, now hesitating, [and] blown hither and

thither by conflicting winds, a prey to the indefinite" (115). Similarly, in "The World as Ballet," Symons writes, "we *lose ourselves* in the boundless bewilderments of [dance's] contradictions" (244, my emphasis); and if the dancer "dissolves the will into slumber" (245), it is reasonable to assume that it is to *his* loss of self, and dissolution of will, that he refers.

Stung by the criticism that followed the publication of his poems in the first edition of *London Nights*, Symons defends himself, in the preface to the second edition, by remarking that "the whole visible world itself ... is but a symbol, [which is] made visible in order that we may apprehend ourselves, and not be blown hither and thither like a flame in the night" (166). Part of that apprehension is Symons's self-perception as the exotic outsider hostile to bourgeois and, specifically, English values. "It is the poet against society, society against the poet, a direct antagonism" (*CW* 8: 150-1), he writes in his essay on Verlaine, and in his autobiographical "A Prelude to Life," he recalls that he had an early and deep loathing for conventional people who "wore prim shabby clothes, and went to church twice on Sundays, and worked at business and professions, and sat down to a meal of tea at five o'clock in the afternoon" (*CW* 5: 21-22). In a sense, Symons *did* remove himself from middle-class social intercourse; in his youth he took "solitary walks" (18) that later became the isolated wanderings of the *flaneur* (32) and the night-time excursions of the stimulus-seeking London aesthete (*MAS* 57, 77-82). Furthermore, as if to enhance his "exotic" status as a Welshman and Celt, Symons liked to present himself, throughout his life, as a gypsy. In his essay on George Moore, he remarks: "My most intimate friends were, first and foremost, Yeats, then Moore: all three of us being of Celtic origin" (57). This was a role he was inspired to adopt as a

young man after reading George Borrow's *Lavengro*, and one for which he embarked upon a life-time study of Romany (*ASL* 13).

Karl Beckson suggests that because of the tension between Symons's desire to mythologise the artist-hero's isolation and alienation and his autobiographical impulse, "A Prelude to Life" contains "distortions in characterization" (*ASL* 6-7). Although Beckson does not give specific examples of these distortions, he suggests that, like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "A Prelude to Life" is a fictionalised account of Symons's early life, and as he points out, here, Symons depicts himself as budding artist and romantic hero.²³

Of course, all autobiography distorts the writer's "authentic" self, and it seems almost superfluous to note that the *fin de siècle* is a period synonymous with aesthetic self-fashioning—what Richard Pine calls, in relation to Oscar Wilde, an obscuring of the real self behind the mask of dandyism.²⁴ But if Wilde wears his mask to hide his "true" identity, Symons's mask seems to hide an absence; put another way, he *is* his mask. The rootlessness and lack of autonomy—the qualities he dramatises as the quintessence of his role as an artist—are "borrowed" to mask an existential void. This is demonstrated where he uses the Platonic, *theatrum mundi* conceit in the opening lines of his poem "Prologue: Before the Curtain":

We are the puppets of a shadow play,

²³ "A Prelude to Life" was first published in 1905, when Symons was aged forty. Beckson suggests that "A Prelude to Life," part autobiographical and part fiction, was influenced by Pater's "A Child in the House." Ian Fletcher states categorically that, "Basing his life on Pater's *Renaissance* was to intensify Symons's isolation and self-consciousness." Ian Fletcher, "Explorations and Recoveries—II: Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance," *The London Magazine* (1960): 7.6, 49.

²⁴ See Richard Pine *The Dandy and the Herald: Manners, Mind and Morals from Brummell to Durrell* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

We dream the plot is woven in our hearts,
 Passionately we play the selfsame parts
 Our fathers have played yesterday. (*CW* 1: 169)

This is an image of life without agency or authenticity, staged and played out in the patriarchal mould of the writer's artistic antecedents. Similarly, in his concluding paragraph of "Prelude to Life," Symons writes of being happy alone among the crowds of London because there he may find the kind of aesthetic experience that will verify, and give authority to, his artistic identity:

I noted every face that passed me on the pavement; I looked in omnibuses, the cabs, always with the same eager hope of seeing some beautiful or interesting person, some gracious movement, a delicate expression, which would be gone if I did not catch it as it went. This search ... grew to almost be a torture to me; my eyes ached with the effort, but I could not control them. At every moment, I knew, some spectacle awaited them.... Life ran past me continually, and I tried to make all its bubbles my own. (*CW* 5: 32)

Thus Symons presents himself in the mould of both Pater and Gautier: the artist as seer, and the impressionist isolated from the world and self-verified by his intense aesthetic experiences. Indeed, five years earlier, Symons had made even more apparent the influence of Paterian aesthetics; in a letter to Rhoda Bowser, the woman who became his wife a year later, he wrote: "Art begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moment he has ever lived. Life has already, to one not an artist, become art in that moment. And the making of one's life into art is after all the first duty and privilege of every man" (qtd. in *ASL* 190).

As not only “A Prelude to Life,” but also much of his other “autobiographical” writing, including his poems, shows, Symons’s projected image of himself as the detached and alienated artist is almost entirely solipsistic. An example is his essay on George Moore. Quoting directly from *The Songs of Experience*, he presents himself as a Blake-like figure who then transmutes into a kind of Nietzschean *Übermensch*—the roaming outsider disdainful of the petty constraints of bourgeois life, and condemned to suffer an heroic rootlessness:

I was born ‘like a fiend hid in a cloud,’ cruel, nervous, excitable, passionate, restless, never quite human, never quite normal, and, from the fact I have never known what it is to have a home, ... my life has been in many ways a wonderful, in a certain way a tragic one: an existence, indeed, so inexplicable even to myself, that I can not fathom it. If I have been a vagabond, and have never been able to root myself in any one place in the world, it is because I have no earthly memories of one sky or soil. It has freed me from many prejudices ... but ... has cut me off from whatever is stable, of long growth in the world. (56)

For self-aggrandisement, however, Symons’s remarks in “Bohemian Years in London” are unsurpassed:

Born under the influence of passionate and perverse stars, my life has been utterly unlike any man I have ever known. Whether alone, or with others, I was always myself: as lonely a Dreamer as ever existed. I have woven a *Loom of Dreams*. I am a strange mixture of cruelty and hatred! There is an intolerable sense of aversion and of repulsion; together with a calculated

malice, an ambiguous aloofness; with an unlucky way of annoying people who exasperate me—a quality I am proud to share with Baudelaire. (*MAS* 70)

Furthermore, Symons, in a sense, places himself centre stage as a man driven by instinct who succumbs to the “animal life” symbolised by dance. In “A Prelude to Life,” he recalls how he “trembled with ecstasy” while reading books that told of “the sensation of physical love” (*CW* 5: 22), and in an essay aptly entitled “Sex and Aversion,” he declares, “I was born wicked and wanton,” and “Sex—the infernal fascination of Sex—even before I actually realised the meaning of its stirring in me—has been my chief obsession” (*MAS* 137-38). In fact, Symons sees sex as the well-spring of his creativity:

One’s own Vitality: that is a centre of Life and Death. It is also the centre of Creation. Without this possession of woman, how can one create? I know not how many artists have created or invented who are sexless; yet there is always something lacking—the essence, quintessence of the ultimate, the achievement—in such painters as Watts, in such writers as Ruskin and Carlyle. There seems to me in such cases as these a kind of sterilisation. (*MAS* 138)

Indeed, for Symons, the roles of lover and writer are interconnected to the degree that, in many of his poems, as with Donne’s sexually charged verse, there is a strong sense that the writing subject *is* the self-dramatised lover, the dominant “I” who

speaks.²⁵ They are written in the first person, and, in typical Petrarchan fashion, address the woman as the object of the speaker's desire. This is particularly true of a number of Symons's poems in *London Nights* that feature dancers, among them Minnie Cunningham, "Violet," and Lydia with all of whom, reputedly, he had affairs. Whether these poems are autobiographical is contestable; indeed, comments made by some of Symons's supposed friends, suggest otherwise.²⁶ Nonetheless, they blur "shadowy" and "real" life to such an extent that it is impossible to separate Symons the writer and speaker from Symons the actual or would-be lover.²⁷ And, as its title suggests, the later collection of poems *Amoris Victima* (1897) is entirely concerned with Symons's feelings of rejection when Lydia ended their relationship.²⁸

In "The World as Ballet," Symons declares that the dancer's appeal is "intellectual" as well as "sensuous" (46), an appeal he defines elsewhere in similarly binary terms, and from the spectator's point of view, as either an "abstract interest in

²⁵ The comparison flatters Symons. Nonetheless, as Murray Pittock points out, Symons's interest in Donne, and his championing of French art during the eighteen-nineties, was paralleled by "the defence of a peculiarly English tradition of self-exploration and self-apotheosis" (71).

²⁶ In this collection there is a group of four sonnets entitled "Variations upon Love," the first of which attests to Symons's admiration of Donne. Here, he flatters by imitation; the first two lines read "For God's sake, let me love you, and give over / These tedious protestations of a lover" (*CV* 1: 244), a direct paraphrase of Donne's "The Canonization."

²⁷ "The Primrose Dance: Tivoli" is dedicated to Minnie Cunningham, and in his autobiographical "Bohemian Years in London," Symons writes that the poem "April Midnight," in his earlier collection *Silhouettes* (*CW* 1: 140), was written about her and "was the result of one of our night adventures" (*MAS* 71). Cunningham also features in, and is the dedicatee of, "The Primrose Dance: Tivoli" in *London Nights* (*CW* 1:188). In a letter he wrote to Edgar Jepson in 1896, Herbert Horne, in vicious (although witty) terms, suggested that Symons was sexually inept, if not actually impotent. He further cast doubt on whether Symons was ever Lydia's lover (*ASL* 161-2, 163). Although Horne's own sexual proclivities, and his reportedly unpleasant personality, make him an unreliable witness, his opinion seems to be supported by Aubrey Beardsley who in that same year wrote maliciously that Symons was "still a virgin back and front" (qtd. in *ASL* 172).

²⁸ *London Nights*, Symons's third collection of poems, first published in 1895, contained "Stella Maris," the most notorious of his "autobiographical" poems. Symons was severely criticised for writing about a sexual exchange with a prostitute in terms that liken her to the Virgin Mary (*ASL* 106-7).

dancing,” or a “concrete interest in dancers” (*Sketch* October 3, 1894).²⁹ His speaker in *London Nights*, however, privileges the latter over the former: the dancer’s aesthetic qualities actually heighten her sexual appeal and are subordinated to a number of the poems’ self-constituting purpose. On the one hand, Symons denies in his preface to the second edition of *London Nights* (1897) that any of the verses are “factual,” yet on the other, he writes, “I declare that every poem is the sincere attempt to render a particular mood which has been mine” (*CW* 1: 167). While the latter statement betrays the confessional element in his poetry writing, Symons does not so much render “mood” as insinuate—or proclaim—his (the speaker’s) presence: in other words, Symons “writes,” or aestheticises, himself as art.

In the first stanza of “At the Foresters,” the speaker actually stands upon the stage: “I stand beside you in the wings” (*CW* 1: 189) he declaims to the dancer beside him. And while the next two stanzas are focussed on her, they serve to reveal Symons’s “divided” identity. Costumed in “The prince’s dress yellow tights, / That fit [her] figure like a glove,” and with her “painted little mouth” and the “mock roses” of a “Divinely rosy rouged ... face,” the dancer’s physical and aesthetic appeal are supercharged because she is *en travestie* and, in a sense, doubly made-up. On the one hand, she complies with Symons’s view of her as a symbol for the “artificial” life of Symbolist art, and on the other, as the object of his “real” lust. The penultimate stanza, moreover, is entirely solipsistic. Although the speaker portrays himself as the object of the dancer’s gaze, it is *his* desire and subjectivity he affirms:

And there is something in your look

²⁹ Alhambra Theatre Box, 1894, Theatre Museum, London.

(Ambiguous, independent Flo!)

As teasing as a half-shut book;

It lures me till I long to know

The many meanings of your look.

(*CW* 1: 189)

To underline its emphasis the poem closes with, “The softer welcome of your eyes” (189).

Similarly, the speaker/poet is the central focus in “At the Stage Door.” Also written in the first person, this poem opens with a statement on his location and intent as he waits for his dancer-lover to appear: “Kicking my heels in the street, / Here at the edge of the pavement, / I wait for you, sweet” (*CW* 1: 182). Yet, despite being on the margin of the performing space, the speaker, in effect, is the soloist around whom the dancers swarm as they spill out of the theatre. Their anonymity as the *corps de ballet* within the poem itself highlights his centrality: their “Faces flicker and veer, / Wavering out of the darkness into the light, / Wavering back into night” (182) as he searches for the face of his lover. The syntax implies that it is *his* face that *all* the dancers seek:

And thin bright faces of girls,

Roving eyes, and smiling lips, and the glance

Seeking, finding perchance,

Here at the edge of the pavement, there by the wall,

One face, out of them all.

(*CW* 1: 182)

Indeed, when finally the chosen dancer emerges, the speaker subordinates her presence to his desire: “the smile of her heart to my heart, of her eyes to my eyes” (182). The hint of the Donnean conceit whereby lovers absorb each other’s identity through the gaze reinforces the self-conscious writing of Symons in his “role” as poet.

Likewise, “On the Stage” is an example of Symons writing about himself; the title refers, ostensibly, to the dancers, but as the speaker he is the actual performer. Symons draws attention to himself by depicting the dancers as undifferentiated, and depersonalised in a way that implies that Symbolist art itself is an extension of his ego, or, at the very least, secondary to his “concrete” interest in dancers. On the one hand, the dancers, metonymically referred to as “rouge, and always tights, and wigs, and tights,” are “real” life; on the other, as “A whirling mist of multicoloured lights” (*CW* 1: 181), they dissolve the boundaries of artistic media in exactly the impressionistic manner of Symbolist art. This is secondary, however, to the speaker’s identification by the dancer who returns his gaze and singles *him* out from the audience:

You see the ballet so, and so,
From amethyst to indigo;
You see a dance of phantoms, but I see
A girl, who smiles to me;
Her cheeks, across the rouge, and in her eyes
I know what memories,
What memories and messages for me. (181)

By separating himself from the collective “You,” and by opposing the insubstantiality of the dance itself with the concrete reality of an individual dancer as his lover, real or

imagined, Symons, again, places himself centre stage. Indeed, his presence is asserted three times in the final line: the concluding word “me,” is presaged not just once, but twice in the alliterative “memories” and “messages.”

To an even more sustained degree, Symons writes “To a Dancer” as a means of staging himself. The opening, capitalised adverb announces his mood, literally, writ large:

INTOXICATINGLY

Her eyes across the footlights gleam,

(The wine of love, the wine of dream)

Her eyes, that gleam for me! (*CW* 1: 171)

Moreover, each of the poem’s five stanzas is constructed syntactically to climax with the recurring idea that the dancer performs for him exclusively. The first stanza’s concluding line is repeated at the end of the second stanza, and concludes the poem as a whole; the line “Her feet that poise for me!” concludes the third stanza; and in the penultimate stanza Symons focusses on the “melody” of the dancer’s body, ultimately, and rhetorically, suggesting that “Yet [it] thrills alone for me?” (171). The poem’s climax—“When, at the magic moment’s close, / She dies into the rapture of repose”—suggests orgasm, and recalls how Gautier sexualises the sensuality and passion of the Spanish dancer Petra Cámara. Here though, the focus is not on the dancer as an aesthetic symbol, but on the speaker who sexualises her in order to “immortalise [his] vivid moment.” Although the image of her movement as “silent waves of wandering sound” reinforces Symons’s view of dance as the essence of symbolic art, it does not mitigate his solipsism; as with “On the Stage,” the poem’s final word is “me.”

Whereas Gautier's writing on dancers reveals the Romantic urge to concretise the aesthetic object, and to experience a purifying union with art, Symons's poetry betrays the *fin-de-siècle*, or—to use the term he rejected—the Decadent preoccupation with the self as art.³⁰ Gautier ultimately sees the erotic dancer as chaste art that exists for itself; Symons sees only the erotic woman whose art exists for his (the poet's) self-verification, or, to use another sexual analogy, for masturbatory self-gratification. Indeed, in all of Symons's poems quoted above, the dancer's eyes are a recurring motif and invariably her gaze is directed towards, and returns, the speaker's. It is apposite, then, that in "At the Stage Door" Symons refers to the dancers as leaving the theatre with their "eyes / Still with the circle of black" (*CW* 1: 182). Here the stage make-up dancers use specifically to emphasise their eyes has a twofold signification: it signals life-as-art—the dancers carry their "made-up" personae into the street—and it draws attention to the gaze that verifies the speaker's presence.³¹ In effect, the speaker/Symons writes of himself as the central performer placed within the dancers' theatrical sphere.

The importance of the dancer's gaze to the speaker/poet's self-verification is illustrated by the fact that, at the music halls, Symons chose to sit as close as possible to the stage: his preferred seat at the Alhambra was in the front row of the stalls, and at the Empire he took a box stall.³² As a letter to Edmond Gosse in December 1893 shows, this

³⁰ Pittock suggests that Symons's rejection of Decadence was nominal (Pittock 71).

³¹ The dancers' make-up also signals their deviance. In *London: A Book of Aspects*, Symons writes specifically of stage make-up that "It has, to the remnant of Puritan conscience, or consciousness that is a heritage of us all, a certain sense of dangerous wickedness, the delight of forbidden fruit. The very phrase, painted women, has come to have an association with sin, and to have put paint on her cheeks, though for the innocent necessities of her profession, gives a woman a kind of symbolic corruption" (55-6).

³² See *ITN* 63. In *The Sketch* April 5, 1893, Symons writes of his "sitting in that seat which I prefer to any in London—the front row of the Alhambra," and again in *The Sketch* October 3, 1894, he refers to

was not just so that he could enjoy an intimate view of the performance, but, rather, so that the performers could have a close view of him. Having returned to the Empire after spending some time in Cornwall, Symons records his delight at having been recognised:

Five minutes after the curtain had gone up, I heard my name, very audibly pronounced, on the stage; and from then to the end, I had all I could do to catch people's eyes, several at once, like a juggler. (Qtd. in *ASL* 103)

Symons has been seen; therefore, he exists. To quote François George's deft redefinition of the Cartesian *cogito*: "*l'autre me voit, donc je suis*" (qtd. in Jay, 288). According to Symons, ballet is "Humanity, youth, beauty, playing the part of itself, and consciously, in a travesty more natural than nature, more artificial than art." That he is lost in the "boundless bewilderments of its contradictions" (TWB 244) is unsurprising; life and art interpenetrate to such a degree that reality and identity have no fixed point. Paradoxically, however, there is a fixed point for Symons in "playing the part" of himself both as a poet and as a member of the music-hall audience. His remark, "In a music-hall the audience is part of the performance" (*CSI* 145), Stokes cites as evidence for how, in the 1890s,

The traditional theatrical process whereby the stage "mirrors" its audience was reinvigorated by the kind of show that the new [music] halls provided, even to the point where the 'amateur' began to sense a reversal of roles: the performance coming to look like a ghostly embodiment of his life, his life beginning to feel like a performance. (*ITN* 62)³³

"That front-row stall which was always at my disposal, how thoroughly I appreciated its privileges, how regularly I occupied it!"

³³ Stokes quotes the term "amateur," directly from one of Symons's reviews, in the *The Star* May 7, 1892. Symons used it, in its original sense, to describe himself as a zealous enthusiast (*ITN* 61, n. 75).

Indeed, when Symons returns to the Empire after a trip to Cornwall, he writes of himself in the third person, as if he were reporting the stage entrance of a celebrated performer: “It was ‘the reappearance of Mr. Arthur Symons in his favourite corner,’ to vary slightly the phraseology of the play-bills” (qtd. in *ASL* 63).

In “Prologue: in the Stalls”—another poem from his *London Nights* anthology—Symons goes even further in representing himself as a performer: first he sees himself as mirrored in the dancer on the stage, then he says he *is* that dancer. But, whereas in “The World as Ballet” dance is the collective expression of Dionysian “animal” life, here it is an isolating, enervating activity, and one symptomatic of the self-dramatising, existential crisis of the late Romantic aesthete. I quote in full:

My life is like a music-hall,
Where, in the impotence of rage,
Chained by enchantment to my stall,
I see myself upon the stage
Dance to amuse a music-hall.

‘Tis I that smoke this cigarette,
Lounge here, and laugh for vacancy,
And watch the dancers turn; and yet
It is my very self I see
Across the cloudy cigarette.

My very self that turns and trips,

Painted, pathetically gay,
 An empty song upon the lips
 In make-believe of holiday:
 I, I, this thing that turns and trips!

The light flares in the music hall,
 The light, the sound, that weary us;
 Hour follows hour, I count them all,
 Lagging, and loud, and riotous:
 My life is like a music-hall. (*CW* 1: 170)

Despite the speaker's proclaimed identification with the dancer, "Prologue" affirms the distinction between the viewing subject (who is, after all, *chained* to his seat in the auditorium) and the aesthetic object. Thus the dancer both personifies and mirrors the *fin-de-siècle* poet: self-defined, or "made-up" as both observed object, and writing subject, Symons, Narcissus-like, observes himself in the act of self-observation, or self-verification. Moreover, the poem's verbal and aural repetition, and the manner in which, like a circular dance, it turns back on itself and returns to its source, reinforces the image of life-as-art as a kind of stasis, or non-being, isolating, purposeless, and in a pessimistic, Nietzschean sense eternally recurrent.

In his article "The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons's *London Nights*," Jan B. Gordon suggests that,

like so many of the decadents, [Symons] is painfully aware that the mere act of writing, because it involves the detachment of a non-participatory eye, is

an imprisoning activity. Unlike the dancer who achieves liberation from the self, the poet is tormented by the fetters of self-consciousness. (Gordon 430)

Referring specifically to “Prologue,” Gordon states: “As [Symons] skirts the periphery of consciousness for an escape from self through the medium of art which immortalizes the moment, his failure to find a gap in the walls of the subjective enclosure drives him further to the center of self” (431). It is Symons’s solipsism (and his associated privileging of the artificial over the real) that blinds him to the dancer’s liberation from the bonds of self-consciousness, and not only causes him to see her as his mirror, but also to abstract and appropriate her performance as “his” to create. In his review of the ballet “Round the Town,” Symons writes,

It amuses me sometimes to sit at the back of the promenade, and undistracted by my somewhat too agreeably distracting surroundings, to follow, by the sound of the music, every movement of the ballet on stage, which I see only in my mind’s eye.... I see it all, and I see it as in a mirror, with something new and strange in its enticing artificiality. (*Sketch* June 7, 1893, 301)³⁴

When Symons recreates the ballet from memory (or, more accurately, *restages* it in his imagination) he heightens its artificial appeal, and, indeed, withdraws behind the “walls of subjective enclosure.” Moreover, his use of metaphor is stunningly apt, given that the notorious promenade at the Empire was embellished with numerous huge mirrors. As he recreated a “mirrored” image of the ballet, Symons could simultaneously gaze upon a

³⁴ The Empire Theatre Box, 1893, Theatre Museum, London.

reflection of himself—the “performer”—in the artificial milieu of the music hall, indulging his moment of self-reflection.

It is relevant at this point to consider the *dancer’s* mirror gazing, its ontological implications, and how they are analogous to Symons in his role as both an aesthete, and a would-be Symbolist writer. As Susan Leigh Foster reminds us in her essay “The Ballerina’s Phallic Pointe,” the dancer, during her training and throughout her performing career, continually studies her mirror image as she strives to produce the transcendent language of her art. In Foster’s words, “The mirror ... transforms muscular sensation into visual symbolization tied to the palpable experience of being looked at and appraised” (111). Moreover, she suggests that if the dancer’s mirror gazing is interpreted in the light of Lacan’s theory on the development of subjectivity, “one could argue that the mirror enhances the dancer’s access to the realm of the symbolic articulated not through words, but rather through the formal vocabulary of positions and steps elaborated in ballet training” (113). Thus Symons’s idea of the dancer as pure symbol is remarkably apposite; according to his Symbolist credo, words, when used for their impressionistic qualities, likewise transcend their denotative (material) function, as his writing on Mallarmé’s poetry demonstrates. In “spiritualising of the word” (*CW* 8: 186), Symons writes, “[Mallarmé] aspired after an impossible liberation of the soul of literature from ‘the body of that death,’ which is the mere literature of words” (181).

Furthermore, the ballerina’s concern with her image in the mirror can be seen as akin to a Symbolist writer’s process of self-transcendence—what Ernest Sturm called the “pseudomasochistic prolongations of sensation” of the writer who is “engaged in an activity external to life,” and who undergoes “depersonalization” as he struggles “with

an occupational disease” (Sturm 7). The idea that Symbolist art is predicated on the artist’s subjective yet transcendent responses is, clearly, a paradox, and one Symons recognises in the dancer who is both life and art—the body to be conquered (unsuccessfully) to produce pure symbol. (Likewise, in his role as rejected lover, gypsy outsider, or ambiguous performer, Symons writes poetry that is less transcendent and symbolic than banally confessional.)

To make his life into art and to create himself as a poet/aesthete, however, is for Symons, to risk losing whatever hold he has on a fixed, coherent identity. In his essay on Verlaine—perhaps the most psychologically unstable of the French Symbolist writers—Symons shows that he sees the search for sensation and creative expression as stretching to the limit the mind’s hold on its rational faculties:

Are there not moments when that link seems to be worn down to so fine a tenuity that the wing of a passing dream may snap it! Is it that the sense of identity is about to evaporate, annihilating all, or is it a more profound identity, the identity of the whole sentient universe, has been at last realised? Leaving the concrete world on these brief voyages, the fear is that we may not have the strength to return, or that we may lose the way back. (*CW* 8: 114)

As Beckson points out, Symons could not resolve the conflict he experienced between the opposing demands of the physical world and metaphysical art. Accordingly, the metaphor of the mirror is a dominant motif in Symons’s life because, in Beckson’s words, it signifies “the divided self” that Wilde dramatised in the character of Dorian Gray, “whose portrait is his mirror” (*ASL* 86). To support this viewpoint, Beckson

quotes Masao Miyoshi's remark that for writers of the nineties "introspection, mirror-gazing is a sanctioned activity. For the world wear your mask; for a true glimpse of yourself, consult your mirror" (Miyoshi 311). Clearly, with Symons, this divided self is expressed in his opposing an abstract (pure) interest in dance-as-art, and the concrete (degenerate) attraction to dancers as bodies.

Beckson uses this mirror metaphor, appropriately, in relation to Symons's poem about the cancan dancer Jane Avril, "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge." In this poem, Symons depicts Avril (the "La Mélinite" of the title) as dancing with total self-absorption, as if before a mirror, and thus, as Beckson points out, she is indeed "Symons's projected self-image of the narcissistic performing artist" (Beckson 86). Narcissism, as a driving force for Symons's self-dramatising, I discuss later; for the moment, I draw attention to the way the poem, as a whole, mirrors the distinction that Symons made between life and art. In three of the six stanzas of "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge" there is no mention of Avril, and the poem's focus is on dance so abstracted that the dancers have no reality. This is particularly so in the two opening verses: metonymically depicted as rose petals that, in turn, are rendered metaphorically as the rouge they wear on their cheeks, the dancers are the dance, and they are the rose whose fleeting images they trace. Moreover, this dance is a waltz—the dance that, according to Symons, immures the performer from the outside world—and here performed on the stage in the hot-house setting of the music-hall, it highlights the dancers' removal from life:

"Olivier Metra's Waltz of Roses"

Sheds in a rhythmic shower

The very petals of the flower;
 And all its roses,
 The rouge of petals in a shower.

Down the long hall the dance returning
 Rounds the full circle, rounds
 The perfect rose of lights and sounds
 The rose returning
 Into the circle of its rounds.

(*CW* 1: 190)

As they simultaneously create and dissolve the image of the rose—itsself emblematic of art’s transience—the dancers are self-referential symbols for the depersonalising and “pure” act of writing symbolically. They enact the “death” of the performer (and the poet) as the conduit for transcendent art.

The rose is traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary—the *rosa mystica*—as well as with the passion of Christ, and on one level, it symbolises, in Symons’s “La Mélinite,” the mystical essence of art, and its inception as a quasi-religious experience.³⁵ (Symons’s use of rose imagery no doubt was influenced by W.B. Yeats’s writing.)³⁶ It is

³⁵ In medieval typology, the petals of the rose represented the five wounds of Christ, a red rose among thorns signified martyrs among persecutors, and the white rose, the purity of the virgin. See Sarah Carr-Gomm, *Dictionary of Symbols in Art* (London: Duncan Baird, 1995) 190. A number of late Romantic English writers, including Swinburne, Wilde, Johnson, and Yeats, adapted rose symbolism to their particular aesthetic purposes. See Lothar Hönnighausen *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) 242-45.

³⁶ Yeats frequently used rose symbolism in relation to Maud Gonne, and as I show in the next chapter, he featured a ritual dance of spiritual transformation that took the shape of a rose in his story “Rosa Alchemica.”

against this image of “holy” art, in other words, art that transcends the carnal, that Symons juxtaposes his image (his projected self-image) of the solo dancer, Jane Avril. In “La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge,” he writes,

Alone, apart, one dancer watches
 Her mirrored, morbid grace;
 Before the mirror, face to face,
 Alone she watches
 Her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace.

Before the mirror’s dance of shadows
 She dances in a dream,
 And she and they together seem
 A dance of shadows;
 Alike the shadows of a dream.

.....

And enigmatically smiling,
 In the mysterious night,
 She dances for her own delight,
 A shadow smiling
 Back to a shadow in the night.

(*CW* 1: 190-1)

Because Avril’s somnolent dancing is projected inwards, she exemplifies art that is subjective and self-gratifying, and that mirrors the *fin-de-siècle* artist’s withdrawal from

normal human interaction. This solipsistic introversion is reflected in the poem itself: with their aural and verbal repetitions, the stanzas turn back on themselves as if to confine the performer within the walls of her egocentricity. Moreover, that Avril's performing name—La Mélinite—is the title of the poem draws attention to art that refers to nothing outside of herself. Thus, in "La Mélinite," alongside his images of objectivised art, Symons represents art as the vehicle for the artist's own satisfaction, and the narcissistic gaze into the mirror as the affirmation of being: I see myself performing, therefore I am. If Avril seems to personify the self-referentiality of decadent art—art that exists entirely for itself—she betrays the paradox of Symons's aesthetic: the so-called transcendent symbol is ultimately subjective. La Mélinite is indeed Symons's projected self-image.

It is significant that Symons describes Avril here as "morbid, vague [and] ambiguous" (190) (and elsewhere, as "depraved," "feverish" and "perverse" [TD 30-31]). The connotations of both psychological and physical disorder imply the *mal de siècle* of the disaffected post-Romantic artist, as well as the decadence Symons was inclined to eschew, yet readily embraced. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* first appeared in 1893 as an essay, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," and here Symons writes that decadence is "an intense self-consciousness ... a spiritual and moral perversity ... a new and beautiful and interesting disease. Healthy we cannot call it" (qtd. in Pine 79). Avril seems therefore to be the personification of art that, according to Symons, is typified by its "disease of form," and that reflects "a civilization grown over-luxurious ... too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or conduct" (qtd. in Pine 79).

When Symons does regard another cancan dancer, Nini Patte-en-l'Air, as the personification of decadent art, her Dionysian qualities co-exist, paradoxically, with her control; she is "Collectedly extravagant," and "Part lewd, aesthetical in part" (*CW* 3: 196). From this it can be inferred that Nini Patte-en-l'Air embodies not only the art/life oppositions Symons posits in "The World as Ballet," but also a kind of Nietzschean Apollonian/Dionysian opposition that he discusses in his essay "Nietzsche on Tragedy" (*Plays* 18). But, importantly, where he represents Nini Patte-en l'Air poetically, Symons correlates the essence of *fin-de-siècle* art and life wholly in terms of female mania and sexual deviance: she is "The Maenad of the Decadence" and "*fin-de-siècle* essentially" (*CW* 3: 196). The predominant image in "Nini Patte-en-l'Air" is of the cancan dancer deliberately flaunting her sexual power and provoking (Symons's) arousal: with her "little heel above her head," she flashes her "drawers," and displays "The naughty eloquence of feet, / The appeal of subtly quivering thighs," as well as "The insinuations indiscreet / Of pirouetting draperies" (196). Thus "Her learned fury wakes the sense / That, fainting, needs for excitant / This science of concupiscence" (197).

Clearly, the qualities Symons condemns in "The Decadent Movement in Literature" are those he is drawn to personify in the cancan dancer, and which highlight not only the tension he felt between his aesthetic principles and *fin-de-siècle* life as he lived it—the self-conscious and self-dramatising plunge into the "decadent" world of the music hall—but also his self-contempt and guilt. I return therefore to the analogy of the dancer's gaze in the mirror and Foster's argument that the dancer's Narcissus-like fascination with her own image is not one born of desire, but contempt. Her mirrored self "is not a mere passive reflection, but instead an active enunciator of physical

deficiencies” that the dancer “comes to loathe” (Foster 111). Indeed, her self-contempt is the inevitable consequence of pursuing an aesthetic ideal through her “inferior” medium, the body. Like the dancer, then, Symons despises the (female) body because he never wholly succeeds in controlling its “deviant” physicality and producing “pure” signifiers. Like the dancer, he reveals the idea of transcendent art as an oxymoron.

Symons longed for aesthetic and spiritual transcendence through art, but he was drawn—in Beckson’s opinion, “fatally” (*ASL* 3)—to sensual pleasure; thus his conflict was not between art and life *per se*, but between art and life as indulgence in the “profane” desires of the flesh. In “Music Halls and Ballet Girls,” as if to assuage his guilt at living the “low” life, he abnegates responsibility by proclaiming his lack of agency: “Did I deliberately choose music-halls and the public houses or did they choose me?” he asks rhetorically, then replies, “I imagine they chose me” (*PAM* 110). Even more revealing is his description of the evening he spent with Violet—“The first ballet girl [he] ever ‘took up with’”(113)—and her friends at a public house, on the eve of her departure for America: it was “so sordid, and so mean, so abominable that it reminded me of certain scenes of Zola.” He concludes:

These inches of bare flesh which these ballet-girls always show on the stage and off the stage, which I had seen in Violet, and which I saw for the last time in that miserable public house, remain, in a sense which one cannot explain, the sign of degeneration. (114)

As Chris Snodgrass puts it, Symons was a Victorian “through and through” (102). It is not surprising then that Symons’s perception of decadence is remarkably similar to Max

Nordau's in *Degeneration*.³⁷ It is even less surprising to learn that, throughout the tour of Italy that he made after the end of his affair with Lydia, Symons carried with him St Augustine's *Confessions*.³⁸

What Jane Avril, Nini Patte-en-L'air, Violet and the anonymous rose-petal waltzers all show is that Symons's aesthetic is inextricably bound to prevailing late nineteenth-century misogynistic attitudes to women. As Bram Dijkstra demonstrates in *Idols of Perversity*, according to such attitudes, women are simultaneously idealised as the elemental free spirits of nature, and reviled as scapegoats for supposed social degeneration,³⁹ In *fin-de-siècle* terms, if woman is narcissistic, morbid and/or Dionysian, she is also prone to auto-eroticism, and, by implication, lesbianism, as well as hysteria, bestiality, and vampirism. (Indeed, many paintings, including those of

³⁷ In his so-called "scientific criticism" of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, Nordau describes, albeit in more extreme terms, writers such as Baudelaire, Huysmans and Verlaine as lacking the "healthy" clarity of expression that comes from intellectual certainty. See Nordau, Book 2, chapter 3, 100-144. Nordau is particularly savage in his attack on Verlaine whom he sees as bearing "all the physical and mental marks of degeneration" (119). It is a matter for speculation whether, on one level, Symons was influenced by Nordau's rantings; his apparent rejection of decadence is certainly evidence of his inability to overcome entirely his Victorian morality.

³⁸ In Naples, Symons wrote an essay in which he drew parallels between his, and the Saint's, life: see *ASL* 166.

³⁹ Among the misogynistic views that Dijkstra cites as influencing art's depictions of women are those of Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin, whose views on the infantilism of woman as expressed in *The Descent of Man* (1871) are drawn directly from those of the craniologist Carl Vogt. Dijkstra also refers to the influence of Paul Möbius, a German pathologist on Breuer and Freud in their *Studies of Hysteria* (1895). As Dijkstra points out, Havelock Ellis claimed to have invented the term narcissism, and in a paper, first published in 1898 entitled "Auto-Eroticism, a Psychological Study," Ellis proclaims narcissism as rare in men, and an essentially female tendency "symbolized by the mirror" (qtd. in Dijkstra, 145).

The idea of the dancer as essentially narcissistic is reinforced in photographs of dancers in newspapers of the period. The *Sketch* October 5, 1885 shows the dancer Emma Palladino in her role as "Nina the Enchantress" balancing *en pointe* in a rather inelegant fifth position while gazing into a mirror held in her right hand. The *Daily Telegraph* April 21, 1891, shows another dancer, "Signorina Bettina de Sortis, Premiere danseuse at the Empire Theatre" similarly gazing at her reflection in a hand-held mirror, and this image of self-absorption is enhanced by the dancer holding her forefinger to her lips as if to palpate her own presence.

Félicien Rops with whose works Symons was familiar, are not just virulently misogynistic, but, arguably, also pornographic.)

That Avril was rumoured to be both lesbian and psychologically disturbed, adds further nuance to Symons's use of the term "morbid." (She spent her adolescent years in Charcot's ward for *grands hystériques* at Salpêtrière, and it was implied that she never totally recovered her "chorea."). Moreover, Symons's description elsewhere of Avril as "a creature of cruel moods, cruel passions" with "an air of depraved virginity" (qtd. in Ellis, 174) confirms—as does his idea of Nini-Patte-en-l'Air's aesthetical lewdness—his endorsement of prevailing gender constructs. Because the source of dance is the female body, the spiritual qualities of art coexist with life that is vulgar and degenerate, and the dancer is indeed *fin-de-siècle* "essentially."

As Ghislaine Wood demonstrates, the *fin-de-siècle* impulse to conflate the erotic and the spiritual finds expression in *art nouveau*—an art movement with which Symons would have been familiar—and whose predominant form is serpentine nature, frequently depicted in a symbiotic relationship with eroticised woman.⁴⁰ Indeed, Symons's image of the round dance (including the waltz) and of any circular or serpentine movement may symbolise purity of art, but equally it suggests "deviant" female sexual power. In Symons's poem "Nora on the Pavement," for example, the dancing Nora of the title—a "Child ... most blithe, and wild as any elf" (*CW* 1: 173)—manifests her "Bird-like" soul in "blithe madness" (174), and with her "Thronging desires and longing looks," draws the speaker into the "laughing circle of her power / The magic circle of her glances"

⁴⁰ Ghislaine Wood shows that because of its connection of eroticism and metaphysicality, *art nouveau* frequently depicts women as both the victims and instigators of sadism. See Ghislaine Wood, *Art Nouveau and the Erotic* (London: V and A Publications, 2000) 72-87.

(173). That she dances in the street, with its implications of prostitution, reinforces the image of Nora's unrestrained and "corrupt" sexuality. And arguably, in "La Mélinite," the rose and the circle suggest female genitalia. As a recurring motif in Symons's poems, moreover, the rose aestheticises, or "purifies," the speaker's sexual liaisons with women—including prostitutes—whom he demonises. "Rosa Flammea" for example, written after Symons's break-up with Lydia, refers to the "Beautiful demon" whose body is the "magical rose" that "begins to blossom / Into the likeness of [his] lost soul on fire" (CW 2: 70-1).

Symons's poem "Javanese Dancers"—admired by Beckson, perhaps for its relative success as a Symbolist poem—is of particular interest because its imagery and structure are highly suggestive of *art nouveau*, and like *art nouveau* it conflates the spiritual and the erotic; "pure" sign is expressed through the medium of the (corrupt) female, dancing body. The dancers move in a rhythmical and serpentine manner that both characterises "feminine" nature and evokes the elusive and mystical qualities of the word. "And now the stealthy dancer comes / Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling," Symons writes in the first stanza; and in the second, "she twines / Her fingers into mazy lines, / The scarves across her fingers twine the while" (CW 1: 125). Then, with a shift of focus from the singular to the plural in the last three stanzas, Symons portrays the collective dance as a continuum that winds its way to the poem's conclusion:

One, two, three, four, glide forth, to and fro,
 Delicately and imperceptibly,
 Now swaying gently in a row,
 Now interthreading slow and rhythmically,

Still, with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
 Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
 With lingering feet that undulate,
 With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill

In a measure while the gnats of music whirr,
 The little amber-coloured dancers move,
 Like painted idols seen to stir
 By the idolators in a magic grove. (125)

The climactic final line suggests that the dancers worship not only at the altar of art, but also at the source of their profane sexuality.⁴¹

Symons's depiction of the Javanese dancers' movements as sensual and non-linear is reminiscent of Gautier's writing on the *bayadères*, and of Petra Cámara in particular, and it shows the pervasiveness of Orientalism as a nineteenth-century literary force. But while, in their representations of the Oriental Other as *femme fatale* (for whom, as I state above, Praz argues that Gautier's Cléopâtre provides the model), French writers such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Laforgue and Huysmans influenced Symons aesthetically, they no doubt also inflamed his latent misogyny. Although, in "Javanese Dancers" (written in 1889, so a relatively early poem), Symons's misogyny is more implicit than explicit, this is not the case with his verse written from the late eighteen-nineties onwards. In the later

⁴¹ The Javanese dancers' sinuous movement, and their manipulation of fabric, recall the popular "serpentine dancing" that Symons admired, and considered to express "what is curious, fanciful, and *fin-de-siècle* in dancing" (qtd. in *ASL* 83). For an account of serpentine dancing, and skirt dancing, and various writers' responses to both, see Sylvia C. Ellis, *The Plays of W.B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (London: Macmillan, 1995) 154-60.

verse, the Oriental Other is the agent of mutilation and death—the terrifying, and wilful destroyer of male autonomy. If thus she is not a catalyst for the *joyous* release from rational consciousness and the constraints of bourgeois authority that she is for Gautier, this is because, for Symons, such a release—*jouissance*—is deeply threatening. Where life intersects with art—sexual guilt with ontological anxiety—the dancing Oriental Other is both Symons’s projected self-image as the Other, and the personification of Symbolist art, with all its seductive yet terrifying promise of boundless and irretrievable meaning.

In “To a Gitana Dancing: Seville” (a poem that recalls Gautier’s writing on Petra Cámara), for example, the highly sexualised Spanish dancer holds the speaker “body and soul” in an ambiguous state of limbo where “time ... is not, and the world is as nought” (*CW* 2: 76), and “the moments seem / Swift as eternity” (77). And, just as her “wanton” body-parts “faint for love” or are “winged with desire,” so this “witch of desire” (76) is represented as ensnaring the speaker in her erotic grip. Hence Symons apostrophises the dancer for her power to “repel, / Entreat, and entice, and bewilder, and build up the spell, / Link by link, with deliberate steps, of a flower soft chain” (76). A few lines later, however, this relatively benign image of the *enchainement* (the dancer’s “chain” of steps) ensnaring the spectator modulates to more threatening images in which the dancer seems to be both the Serpent and its victim. Symons writes “for you turn, you turn / As a startled beast in the toils: it is you that entreat, / Desperate, hating the coils that have fastened your feet” (76). These lines refer, ostensibly, to the dancer’s horror at the desire her dancing unleashes and by which she is controlled, but, as his explicit snake imagery

elsewhere confirms, Symons speaks of his own feelings of being trapped by desire for, on the one hand, transcendence through art, and on the other, sensual pleasure.

In fact, where Symons frequently juxtaposes seemingly benign images of circular movement (usually those of the rose) with images of snakes, he conflates the threat of ontological disintegration posed by art with that of corrupt woman (the Serpent-Eve), and the torment of his own sexual guilt. It is relevant, therefore, that in "Prelude to Life," where Symons recalls his youthful conflicting feelings about women, sex and the body, he relates them directly to recurrent nightmares of ascent and fall that figured spiralling movement and writhing snakes. He writes that he felt a "reverence" (*CW* 5: 22) for women despite believing sex to be "essentially wicked," and although he perceived the body as "something remote [and] evil," he "feverishly yearned for sensual experience" (*CW* 5: 24). At the same time, he also recalls his "dreams of abstract horror" (24) that featured "infinite spirals" up which he had to climb, ladders and stairways from which he fell into "cold pits of darkness," and, significantly, either "the tightening of a snake's coils around [him], or of walking with bare feet across a floor curdled with snakes" (23-4).

Just as he portrays himself as a fiendish, Blakean figure, so Symons practically dramatises himself as a textbook case for Freudian analysis.⁴² In his *Memoirs*, which are even more self-dramatising than his "Prelude to Life," Symons actually represents his lover Lydia as if she were the Medusa. "Her raven's hair had in it a whole midnight, storm tormented," he writes, and "her nerves extended to her tresses, which thrilled to my touch, which hissed when she combed them, like black rebellious snakes" (*Memoirs*

⁴² The Oedipus theory is too well-known to need repeating here. (It is striking, however, that Lydia, the dancer with whom Symons had a prolonged and traumatic affair, bore his mother's name.)

161). According to Freud, the artistic representation of the Medusa's hair derives directly from the castration complex, with snakes mitigating the horror of castration.⁴³ Indeed, Symons describes Lydia as "Lilith" (164), and writes that "As a Vampire, she sucked the blood out of me; as Circe, she gave me wine that I drank at her matchless lips; as Helen of Troy, she cast into the very marrow of my bones that sweet and adulterous poison no antidote can ever alleviate" (163).

That Symons describes Lydia's emasculating power in such in terms is consistent with *fin-de-siècle* depictions of the quintessential nineteenth-century *femme fatale*, Salome.⁴⁴ Symons was drawn to put his own literary stamp on the biblical dancing woman who had fascinated other nineteenth-century writers, and his misogyny, ontological anxiety and profound sexual guilt all converge in what is his most threatening poetic image of the dancer. His depiction of the archetypal *femme fatale* in his poem "The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias," presents her as co-existing with the dance in what Ian Fletcher calls "a composite image of the poet's situation ... of the dancer as fascinating and terrible; warning and epiphany at once." According to Fletcher, the poem reflects the "poet's situation" in "a society that had rejected his wisdom" (Fletcher 57). More to the point, the figure of Salome represents for Symons the personal threat of losing himself, both as a poet, in the unstable, ephemeral realm of

⁴³ A considerable amount of *fin-de-siècle* art presents images, often sado-masochist in tone, of the Medusa, and of women either embracing, or in the embrace of, snakes. See Dijkstra 305-313. Interestingly, Toulouse-Lautrec produced a poster featuring Jane Avril in a costume that from skirt to bodice is encircled with a cobra, and where her body seems to emulate its coiling movement, she and cobra seem entwined in a way that connotes her as Eve, and the Serpent. See Ebria Feinblatt and Bruce Davis, *Toulouse-Lautrec and his Contemporaries: Posters from the Belle Epoque from the Wagner Collection* (New York: Abrams, 1985).

⁴⁴ Charles Bernheimer states that "Castration, fetishism, decadence, the mirror of Medusa—the single *fin-de-siècle* figure who served to focus the interplay of these factors most dramatically was Salome" (Bernheimer 66).

Symbolist art, and as a man in the thanatal world of woman. Accordingly, Symons presents Salome both as the single, aestheticised, biblical figure, and, by drawing on the convention whereby she is metaphorically associated with the wind, as the multiple daughters of Herodias.⁴⁵ Thus the dancer is symbiotic with nature's overwhelming, and self-generating force and on one level Symons posits a synthesis of body/life and spirit/art: the wind is the dance, and its catalyst; in the poem's opening lines, the "pale and windy multitude" gradually emerges as "many women dancing" that constitutes the force that awakens Salome's sexual desire, and unleashes her creative energy. At first, Symons depicts her as "a young tree" with "her narrow feet ... rooted in the ground," clearly an image that suggests Salome's initial contact with life. Then, "the dim wind passes over her," and

Rustlingly, she awakens, as if life
Thrilled in her body to its finger-tips.
Her little breasts arise as if a thought
Beckoned, her body quivers; and she leans
Forward, as if she followed, her wide eyes
Swim open, her lips seek; and now she leans
Backward, and her half-parted lips are moist,
And her eyelashes mingle. (*CW* 2: 36-7)

And so Salome launches into a dance that symbolises her (art's) uprootedness and flight from (masculine) reality: her symbiotic relationship with unrestrained nature is stressed

⁴⁵ Ian Fletcher points out that Symons owed his knowledge of the mythical background to the daughters of Herodias to Yeats, who at the time had already published *The Hosting of the Sidhe* (1893). See Fletcher, "Explorations and Recoveries—II: Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance," *London Magazine* 7.6 (1960): 57-8.

by “the wind of dancing in her blood,” and her artificiality by the dazzling jewels, tinkling coins and clashing jewellery (37) that adorn her body.⁴⁶ (They also suggest the synaesthetic effect of words used symbolically.) When Salome’s dance climaxes in a saintly man’s decapitation, it signifies the loss of control—the “castration”—that Symons feared.

In effect, however, Symons multiplies Salome’s (castrating) power; he concludes her dance with the lines “They dance, the daughters of Herodias, ... And always when they dance, for their delight, / Always a man’s head falls because of them” (38). Here he seems to refer to the destruction of the poet as the conduit of the spiritualised word. This is also intimated where he writes “they do not know / That they are slaying the messenger of God” (36) and where he concludes the poem with the invocation, “But dance, I pray you, so that I from afar / May hear your dancing fainter than the drift / Of the last petals falling from the rose” (40). With this final image of a disintegrating rose, Symons makes an appeal for transient, pure art to remain within the poet’s self-enclosing creative sphere, yet at a safe distance. That this request for distance is to protect himself not just from art, but also from woman’s sexual power is implied by the lines “They desire love, and the desire of men; / And they are the eternal enemy” (38). Moreover, after referring to the dance of the daughters of Herodias as “The weaving of slow steps about men’s hearts” Symons continues,

They shall be beautiful, they shall be loved.

And though a man’s head falls because of them

⁴⁶ Symons depicts Salome in terms highly reminiscent of Huysmans’ description of Moreau’s painting on the subject. See J.-K. Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris: Fasquelle) 74-8. Symons describes Huysman’s novel as the “breviary of the decadence” (*CW* 8: 77).

Whenever they have danced his soul asleep,
 It is not well that they should suffer wrong;
 For beauty is still beauty, though it slay,
 And love is love, although it love to death.

(40)

If Symons maintains the art/life polarities—abstract dance as beauty and the dancing woman as life—the threat of annihilation they pose is equally “feminine;” to put it another way, Symons projects his anxieties onto woman.

Like Dorian Gray’s portrait, Avril reflects Symons’s morbidity and narcissism, and the daughters of Herodias are the projected multiple fears of his divided self. On one level, they reify the lack of a unified, or central meaning, and the collapse of the denotative authority of language—the tyranny of description—that parallels the poet’s dissolution of autonomy, and his inability to return from his flights of the imagination, either to the centre of self, or to the external world. On another level, paradoxically, they represent woman’s castrating power that draws the poet away from art, and fragments his being. As Symons puts it in reference to Keats’s relationship with Fanny Brawne,

Have you ever thought of the frightful thing it is to shift one’s centre? That is what it is to love a woman. One’s nature no longer radiates freely, from its own centre; the centre is shifted, is put outside one’s self. (*RM* 300-1)

Even more misogynistic are the words he puts into the mouth of the character who gives his name to his short story “Christian Trevalga”: “Woman ... is the beast of prey; rapacious of affection, time, money, all the flesh and all the soul, one’s nerves, one’s attention, pleasure, duty, art itself! She is the rival of the idea” (*CW* 5: 66). Trevalga is a

pianist who rejects a woman for music, but gradually becomes so deeply infused with the music he creates that he loses all contact with reality and goes mad (*CW* 5: 57-75). Because Symons based the character on the pianist Pachmann, his essay on the latter is of interest because it amplifies the parallels Symons drew between himself and the dancer's reflected image. In "Pachmann and the Piano" Symons remarks that the pianist plays Chopin in a "morbid" way because "Chopin was morbid" and his music, with its "fevers and sweats" is "unhealthy" (*Plays* 200). Pachmann plays it "somnambulistically ... as if it were a living thing on whose nerves one were operating, and as if every touch meant life or death" (200), and its beauty is "not of the soul [and] not of the flesh" (201)" but "a divine hallucination" (202). As such, Chopin's music "transports [Pachmann] into some mid-region of the air, between hell and heaven," and, like it, he becomes "inhuman" (201).

Like Pachmann, at one with the "morbid" music of Chopin, the dancer presents an image of the "inhuman" artist completely beyond the realm of the "healthy" patriarchal club-world of London, and English, middle-class Puritanism. Thus Symons anthropomorphises music, and we can see in praxis the collapsing of boundaries between art and artist that highlights the significance of the dancer as both a symbol for Symbolist art, and a reflection of the Symbolist artist. Dance that is essentially Dionysian belongs in the exhilarating but dangerous supra-human realm of art poised between the polarities of body and soul, life and death, rationality and madness.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Charcot, whose work was so closely observed by Freud, was not only convinced that nervous disorders were sexual at source, he also saw a relationship between his patients' symptoms and the obsessive dancing attributed in medieval times to demoniac possession. See McCarren, *DP*, chapter 1 "Idealism, Pathology, Idiopathy: Chorus, Chorea, and Chora" 6-48.

As Beckson points out, “Christian Trevalga” is remarkably prescient, for Symons too lost his reason, and, although he recovered, he never fully re-established his career as a writer (*ASL* 219). In 1908, while in Italy, Symons suffered a mental collapse, and in a bizarre example of life imitating art, he was briefly imprisoned, and chained up in a cell: his self-image, in “Prologue,” of the writer/speaker “Chained by enchantment to [his] stall,” became a reality. Furthermore, in his *Memoirs*, Symons recalls Lydia’s response to Walter Pater’s belief that women are susceptible to Bacchic power. According to Symons, Lydia tells him “You are certainly no god: but with women ... you seem to have some of that almost woman-like fascination that excites them and exasperates them,” and then asks “Why, Arthur, do you read of madness, speak of madness? ... There is something – oh, ever so many things! – in you that I can’t make out. You are so inhuman.” To which Symons replies, “Am I really inhuman? ... Why not? What’s the use of being human?” (161). Although Symons preferred to see himself as “inhuman” in the Nietzschean sense of the *Übermensch* who disdains the repressions of Western, Christian morality, he actually feared he was “inhuman” in the sense of being not-masculine, and therefore “feminine.”⁴⁸ And because Symons’s view of the dancer is inextricably bound to his self-observation as a writer and aesthete, it is worth recalling that Gautier preferred the erotic qualities of the technically imperfect “Oriental” dancer to the cold precision of the highly trained ballerina. Unlike Gautier, Symons cannot reconcile the dancer’s erotic physicality with her abstract appeal as art because he privileged her “corrupt” physical appeal over her aesthetic purity. No doubt, this is why Symons (unlike W.B. Yeats) does not seem to have been attracted to the dancing of Loie

⁴⁸ In a curious parallel, Nietzsche also went mad.

Fuller, whose body was obliterated by the vast draperies that she manipulated. If thus his writing on dancers reveals the paradox of spiritualised art sourced in the female body, it shows the unresolved conflict that Symons experienced between the Western theological and philosophical traditions that privilege intellect and “soul” over emotions and the body, and his wish to embrace the “exotic” notion of Symbolist art free from Victorian literary and sexual repression.

Chapter 4

The Dancer as Image in the Works of W.B. Yeats

The Woman of the Sidhe herself,
 The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow.
 She is always flitting upon this mountain-side,
 To allure or destroy.

As a number of critics have suggested, Arthur Symons is a pivotal figure in late nineteenth-century English literature, not as a poet, but as a messenger. His attempts to produce verse that reflected, on the one hand, a French Symbolist aesthetic and, on the other, an English tradition of self-apotheosis, were largely unsuccessful; his poetry seldom goes beyond pastiche, and is largely forgotten. His book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), however, has been far-reaching in its influence. This collection of essays on a number of nineteenth-century French writers, including Gérard de Nerval, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé, spread the gospel of a French aesthetic that led directly to the high Modernism of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and W.B. Yeats. Eliot, for example, writes of the "great debt" he owes Symons, proclaiming,

but for having read his book, I should not, in the year 1908, have heard of Laforgue or Rimbaud: I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbière. So the Symons

book is one of those which have affected the course of my life. (qtd. in *ASL* 200)¹

That the poet most immediately influenced by Symons's responses to French Symbolism was W.B. Yeats, however, scarcely needs repeating here. Symons dedicated *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* to Yeats, writing that he did so "both as an expression of a deep personal friendship and because you, more than any one else will sympathise with what I have to say in it, being yourself the chief representative of that movement in our country" (*SML* xix). Throughout the 1890s, the period during which Symons was writing the essays that ultimately formed *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, he and Yeats were frequently in each other's company, as both friends and confrères. In 1890, Symons joined the Rhymers' Club that was co-founded by Yeats, Ernest Rhys and T.W. Rolleston, and from October 1895 to March 1896, Yeats shared lodgings with Symons at Fountain Court. From July to September of that year, Yeats and Symons journeyed together in Ireland, followed by a trip to Paris in the November. Although their friendship faltered after Symons's breakdown in 1908, Yeats retained a warm regard for the man who "could slip as it were into the mind of another," and by whose "sympathy" his thoughts "gained in richness, and in clearness" (*Au* 319). As Yeats puts it in his *Memoirs*: "Of all the men I have known [Symons] was the best listener; he could listen as a woman listens, never meeting one's thoughts as a man does

¹ Interestingly, Karl Beckson argues that Symons's images of the dancer in "To a Gitana Dancing: Seville" where she fuses stillness with motion and timelessness with time anticipates Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (203). For discussions on Symons's influence on Modernist writers, see David Hayman, *Joyce et Mallarmé* (Paris, 1956) 27-34; Thomas H. Jackson, *The Early Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968) 28-33; and C. Jay Fox, "James Joyce's Literary Debt to Arthur Symons," *Encyclia* 58 (1981): 69-78.

with a rival thought, but taking up what one said and changing [it] as if it were flesh and bone” (87).²

These remarks support Symons’s own self-image as “feminine,” and they also reveal Yeats’s belief in the importance of “feminine” embodied thought. This I discuss later. For the moment they deserve attention for how they confirm that Symons was not only a “conduit for *fin de siècle* aesthetics” (*ASL* 332), but also, specifically, a sounding board for Yeats’s developing ideas; in Yeats’s words, “I shall [n]ever know how much my practice and my theory owe to the passages that [Symons] read me from Catullus and from Verlaine and Mallarmé” (*Au* 319-20).³ Because Yeats read French poorly, Symons fulfilled the vital function of introducing him to French Symbolist poetry, and, by extension, to the idea of the dancer as a symbol for transcendent art.

On his first visit to Paris in 1890, Symons, with Havelock Ellis, had visited Mallarmé, attending one of the Tuesday evening meetings of the famed *cénacle*. Symons’s regard for Mallarmé as the high priest of Symbolism is demonstrated in his early essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” where he describes the French poet as “the prophet and pontiff of the movement, the mystical and theoretical leader of the great emancipation” (qtd. in *ASL* 97). Later, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Symons pays tribute to Mallarmé for having achieved, in “L’Après-midi d’un Faune” and *Hérodiade*, the Wagnerian poetic ideal:

² In practice, from this time, Yeats increasingly withdrew from Symons. In a letter to Rhoda dated October 8, 1918, John Quinn responds to her complaints on Yeats’s distancing from Symons (Yeats had married Georgie Hyde-Lees the year before), remarking “I always used to think he had a great capacity for friendship, and I was pained to hear what you said of his neglect of A” (qtd. in *ASL* 292).

³ Evidence suggests that Symons was as much influenced by Yeats as Yeats was by Symons.

In these two poems I find Mallarmé at the moment when his own desire achieves itself; when he attains Wagner's ideal, that 'the most complete work of the poet should be that which, in its final achievement, becomes perfect music': every word is a jewel, scattering and recapturing sudden fire, every image is a symbol, and the whole poem is visible music. (*CW* 8: 180)

Symons's regard for Mallarmé was such that, during the 1890s, he not only wrote articles on his works, but also translated selections of his poetry; and it was the latter in particular that influenced Yeats. As Yeats puts it, "those [translations] from Mallarmé may have given elaborate form to my verses of those years, to the later poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, to *The Shadowy Waters*" (*Au* 320).⁴ Where he recalls Symons reading to him Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*, Yeats quotes Symons's translation of the passage where Herodias addresses her nurse and "it may be, the moon also":

The horror of my virginity
 Delights me, and I would envelop me
 In the terror of my tresses, that, by night
 Inviolable reptile, I might feel the white
 And glimmering radiance of thy frozen fire,
 Thou that art chaste and diest of desire,
 White night of ice and of cruel snow!
 Eternal sister, my lone sister, lo
 My dreams uplifted before thee! now, apart,

⁴ Symons visited Mallarmé two years later with George Moore. He records his impressions of the Tuesday evening meetings in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (64).

So rare a crystal is my dreaming heart,
 And all about me lives but in mine own
 Image, the idolatrous mirror of my pride,
 Mirroring this Herodiade diamond-eyed.

(*Au* 321)⁵

Yeats then remarks:

I am certain there was something in myself compelling me to attempt
 creation in art as separate from everything heterogeneous and casual, from all

⁵ This was the only section of Symons's 1896 translation of *Hérodiade* to be published. See Beckson, 357, n. 38. With her terrifying Medusan hair, this Hérodiade also seems to be the model for Symons's Lydia, as well as for his later versions of Salome. In "The Dancer's Reward," Part 8 of his *Danse du Ventre* written in 1920, for example, Symons conflates the dancer and her victim—art and the artist—in highly exaggerated versions of Mallarméan terms; he writes of Salome that

cruelty
 Glares in her eyes; her hand holds like a sword
 One lock of dead black hair that angrily
 Revolts as snakes do their tangled lair.
 Ah, the death-agony of that dear mouth,
 Salome's mouth, when it was living, adored!
 Still the blood drips. O wind out of the south
 Waft hellward that crescent on Salome's hair!
 Ah, the sweet hell that, after her dancing grips her!
 That head of death; the terror of it grows
 Upon her. O that mad folly of the Rose
 That dances in her vision and that lips her!

(*CW* 2: 285)

There exist a number of letters that Mallarmé wrote to Symons, one of which records his response to Symons's translation. Mallarmé states rather flatteringly, "il me semble et là, vraiment, je suis présomptueux, que j'aie écrit en Anglais" (qtd. in *ASL* 156). Mallarmé's verse reads:

J'aime l'horreur d'être vierge et je veux
 Vivre parmi l'effroi que me font mes cheveux
 Pour, le soir, retirée en ma couche, reptile
 Inviolé sentir en la chair inutile
 Le froid scintillement de ta pâle clarté
 Toi qui te meurs, toi qui brûles de chasteté
 Nuit blanche de glaçons et de neige cruelle!

.....
 Je me crois seule en ma monotone patrie
 Et tout, autour de moi, vit dans l'idolâtrie
 D'un miroir qui reflète en son calme dormant
 Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant...

(*SMP* 38)

character and circumstance, as some Herodiade of our theatre, dancing
seemingly alone in her narrow moving luminous circle. (*Au* 321)

If Yeats recognised in Mallarmé's cold, remote and isolated Herodias a symbol for art that is both transcendent and self-generating, it is significant that the self-enclosed sphere in which she dances, the source and reflection of her power, is the moon and its emanation.⁶ So enduring is the image of a lunar Herodias as a symbol for art, that almost four decades after he heard Symons's translation of the *Hérodias*, Yeats recreated her in his penultimate play *A Full Moon in March* (1935). Named simply "The Queen," Yeats's Herodias, like her precedent, is narcissistic, cruel, virginal, and remote (the last two qualities emphasised by her veiled face). That the Queen is associated specifically with the lunar cycle is indicated by the play's title, and confirmed by the Swineherd who has come to woo her because she "must be won / At a full moon in March ... That moon has come" (*CPI* 624).⁷ Moreover, as Beckson points out, the Queen's subsequent address to the Swineherd echoes that spoken by Herodias in Symons's translated version of Mallarmé's poem (*ASL* 156). To her suitor's declaration that to woo her he has overcome "dust and mire," and "Beasts that scratched ... [his] flesh" (623), the Queen warns:

⁶ Yeats's belief that creativity is a lunar power became codified in the complex system he explicated in *A Vision*. That this was a prevailing idea that pre-dates this 1917 work is shown in his essay "The Stirring of the Bones." Here he recalls the time in the summer of 1896 when, with Symons, he was staying at Tulira Castle, the home in Galway of Edward Martyn. "I decided that it was there I must make my invocation of the moon," he recollects. This he did "night after night," until he was rewarded with a vision of a galloping centaur, and a naked woman of incredible beauty, standing upon a pedestal and shooting an arrow at a star" (*Au* 372).

⁷ In fact, consistent with his theories on Symbolist drama, Yeats put most of the characters in his plays in masks, or required that they be made up as if they were wearing masks. For the influence of Japanese Noh drama on Yeats see Richard Taylor *The Drama of W.B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No* (New Haven: Yale UP 1976). See also Ellis 86-149. Yeats was also influenced by Gordon Craig's doctrine of non-human expression according to which he preferred puppets to human performers.

Remember through what perils you have come;
 That I am crueller than solitude,
 Forest or beast. Some I have killed and maimed
 Because their singing put me in a rage,
 And some because they came at all. Men hold
 That woman's beauty is a kindly thing,
 But they that call me cruel speak the truth,
 Cruel as the winter of virginity.

(624)

True to her threats, the Queen has the Swineherd decapitated, and the play ends with her dance “*of adoration*” before his severed head (629).

It is interesting to note at this point that there are also remarkable similarities between the representation of the Queen in *A Full Moon in March* and Gautier's legendary heroine in his novella *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre*. The most obvious similarities are that both Cléopâtre and the Queen enjoy the status of semi-divine monarch and both are associated with night. Furthermore, both women are objects of adoration by low-born men—the former is wooed by a peasant, and the latter by a nameless swineherd—and their dancing is related directly to their monarchic and sexually transgressive power: Cléopâtre's dance is designed to facilitate Meïamoun's ecstatic surrender to death, and the Queen's dance, while embracing the Swineherd's severed head, is blatantly orgasmic.

On one level, then, Yeats's adoption of the figure of Herodias, via Mallarmé and Symons, can be seen as evidence for the continuation of Gautier's aesthetic—*l'art pour l'art*—whereby the dancing *femme fatale* is emblematic of the supremacy of quasi-

religious art over bourgeois philistinism.⁸ Indeed, like Gautier, Yeats wrote frequently and forcefully about his contempt for prevailing materialist values, the ascendancy of science and industrialism, and the obsession with utility (in his case, Benthamite utilitarianism); like Gautier, he polarises these values against the mystery of the spirituality of art, while exalting the artist as priest. “The mere business of living, of making money, of amusing oneself, occupies people more and more, and makes them less and less capable of the difficult art of appreciation,” Yeats writes in “Ireland and the Arts,” before declaiming: “We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith” (*E&I* 203). Furthermore, in his essay “The Autumn of the Body,” Yeats defends decadence as a sign of the latent interest “in the many things which positive science, the interpreter of exterior law, has always denied” (*E&I* 191-92), and deduces that “man,” weary of a world reduced to tangible things, will become “philosophical above everything.” It is then that the arts will

take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and lead us back upon our journey [to philosophy] by filling our thoughts with the essence of things, and not with things. (193)

In the closing sentence of his essay, Yeats asserts his faith in a future when artists will capture such essences:

We will learn again how to describe ... an old man wandering among enchanted islands, his return home at last, his slow-gathering vengeance, a

⁸ This is not to underestimate the immense influence on Yeats of William Blake; Yeats, with Edwin Ellis, published, in 1893, three volumes on Blake. For Yeats, it was Blake who “announced the religion of art” (*E&I* 111), having extrapolated from the works of Jacob Boehme and the alchemist writers the idea that “the imaginative arts were ... the greatest of Divine revelations” (112). Accordingly, Blake was “content to express every beautiful feeling that came into his head without troubling about its utility or chaining it to utility” (113).

flitting shape of a goddess, and a flight of arrows, and yet make all of these so different things “take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones,” and become “an entire word,” the signature or symbol of a mood of the divine imagination as imponderable as “the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves.” (194)

That Yeats supports his view with quotations transposed from Symons’s essay on Mallarmé shows not only the importance of the Herodias figure as a symbol for such art, but also (obliquely) that *l’art pour l’art* is the well-spring for Yeats’s aesthetic.⁹ As Helen Grace Zagona notes in *The Legend of Salome and the Principle of Art for Art’s Sake*, Herodias’s “cold, perfect, aloof beauty” reflects Mallarmé’s “insistence on the jewel-like perfection of the poem,” and her sterility “the gratuitous nature which he considered indispensable to art” (49-50).¹⁰ As I have shown, for Gautier, it is the dancer—real and fictional—whose chaste eroticism and marmoreal perfection symbolises art as the essence of pure beauty.¹¹

Nonetheless, Yeats’s treatment of the Herodias figure—especially in the late plays—is highly individualistic. Apart from its anti-realist dramaturgy, which was strongly influenced by Japanese Noh drama and the ideas of Gordon Craig, *A Full Moon in March* presents the dancing Queen and her victim in ways that make their symbolic roles indecipherable at first glance. For example, unlike Gautier’s Meïamoun, whose own

⁹ Although the Salome myth dominated images of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale*, as Praz suggests, Gautier’s Cléopâtre can be considered her precedent.

¹⁰ It is worth recalling here the influence of Huysmans’s representations of Moreau’s Salome with her jewel-encrusted garments.

¹¹ Although Mallarmé’s more immediate influence was Baudelaire, it is interesting to note that throughout *Hérodiade*, Mallarmé uses images of precious stones that recall the imagery of Gautier’s poems in *Émaux et Camées*.

beauty makes him a worthy suitor for the legendary Cléopâtre, the Swineherd in Yeats's play is dressed in filthy rags and reeks of pig dung, and therefore seems an inappropriate match for the Queen. Moreover, the Queen's blatantly orgasmic dance, performed after the Swineherd's decapitation, has connotations of insemination that are foreshadowed earlier in the play when the Swineherd refers to a woman impregnated by a drop of blood (*CPI* 626). In a further curious departure from the French rendition of the Salome-Herodias myth, the Swineherd's severed head sings, and even more curiously, his song is a variant of the nursery rhyme "Jack and Jill."

The King of the Great Clock Tower—a less concentrated version of *A Full Moon in March*, and written a year earlier—is an equally strange rendering of the Herodias myth. Here, the Queen also decapitates her suitor and dances before his severed head; and to emphasise her cruelty, and her remote beauty, she not only wears a mask (633), but also refuses to speak. From the time of her mysterious appearance at the King's court a year earlier, she has sat, in the words of the King, "Dumb as an image made of wood or metal / A screen between the living and the dead" (634). This iconic Herodias, moreover, belongs to Celtic mythology: in the opening line of the play, the Second Attendant implies that the Queen's origin is Tir-nan-oge, the Country of the Young. This is the faery realm, where Niamh the daughter of the Celtic god of love, in the guise of a hornless deer, lures Oisín, the son of the Irish warrior Finn (634). In Tir-nan-oge, the First Attendant tells us,

the hound that Oisín saw pursues
The hornless deer that runs in such a fright;
And there the woman clasps an apple tight

For all the clamour of a famished man.

(634)

Thus the figure of the frigid, unworldly Herodias is powerfully associated with that of the transgressive Irish faery. The image of the “hornless deer,” juxtaposed with that of a frigid Eve, is a warning that the Queen withholds, rather than offers, sexual fulfilment, and Yeats thereby reinforces decapitation as a metaphor for castration.

In his last play, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), Yeats closes his dramatised adaptation of the Cuchulain saga with an even stranger version of the Herodias myth. The play’s subject matter is obvious from its title, but while the legendary Irish hero is the substitute John the Baptist, he is decapitated not at the command of an Herodias, but literally at the hand of the “Blind Man,” a character who reappears from the much earlier play *On Baile’s Strand* (1904). And although the woman who dances is Emer, Cuchulain’s widow, her dance is “arranged” (703) by Morrighu, a savage, single-eyed war goddess with the head of a crow. Furthermore, Emer dances ambiguously, “*in adoration or triumph*” and “*rage*” (703), and not only before Cuchulain’s severed head mounted on a pedestal, but also around six others, placed in a circle. That each of the seven heads is represented by “a black parallelogram” (703) reminds us that this *is* a Symbolist play, but scarcely relieves the horror of the image.

In their representations of the Salome-Herodias figure, and in their dramaturgy as a whole, Yeats’s late plays are evidence of an eclecticism that makes his aesthetic too complex to be subsumed under either Gautier’s concept of *l’art pour l’art* or Mallarmé’s symbolist theories. Indeed, the significance of the Salome-Herodias dancer to Yeats’s complex aesthetic as revealed in *A Full Moon in March* and in his other works—plays,

poetry and prose—can only be appreciated in reference to the various influences Yeats absorbed as an Anglo-Irish writer born in the second half of the nineteenth century. French Symbolism, with its origins in *l'art pour l'art*, is only one strand in an aesthetic as complex as the interlaced patterning of Celtic design; the many others include the ideas that Yeats drew together in the system he expounded in *A Vision*, ideas drawn from the occult, the Cabal, Gnostic and Neoplatonic belief, Theosophy and Rosicrucianism, as well as from the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche.¹²

Blake and Nietzsche, in particular, substantiated and affirmed the over-arching idea Yeats codified in the system he sustained throughout his life, that all existence, indeed consciousness itself, is a struggle between opposing principles.¹³ (That Yeats was an Anglo-Irish writer, for whom Gaelic was not his mother tongue, perhaps contributes to this view.) In a letter he wrote late in life to Ethel Mannin, he says, “To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness” (*Letters* 918). More abstrusely, in *A Vision*, Yeats describes consciousness and existence as governed by the warring oppositions that he calls—in terms borrowed from Nietzsche—*subjective* (or

¹² Yeats discusses Swedenborg’s ideas in his essay “Swedenborg, Mediums, Desolate Places” (*Expl* 30-70), and his interest in Swedenborg is one he shared with Gautier. In *Spirite*, as a kind of spokesman for Swedenborg’s ideas, the Baron de Féroë conditions Guy de Malivert to be receptive to communication with Spirite.

¹³ Like Symons, Yeats would have been aware of Ellis’s work on Nietzsche in the 1896 publication of *The Savoy*. From 1902 onwards, he began to read Nietzsche in earnest. In a letter to Lady Gregory, dated September 26, 1902, Yeats apologises to Lady Gregory for his infrequent correspondence with her on the grounds that she has “a rival in Nietzsche, that strong enchanter” whom he has read “so much” that his eyesight is suffering (*Letters* 379). It is interesting to note that he also comments on the affinity he sees between Blake and Nietzsche, writing that “Nietzsche completes Blake and has the same roots” (*Letters* 379). As he puts it elsewhere, Nietzsche is one “whose thoughts flow always, though with an even more violent current, in the bed Blake’s thought has worn” (*E&I* 130).

antithetical), and *objective* (or *primary*).¹⁴ The former is allied with self-realisation, the latter with self-abnegation, and both are paralleled by the *Four Faculties*, namely, the *Will* and the *Creative Mind*, related to the external world and objective ideas, and *Mask*, and *Body of Fate*, related to the individual's self-image and inherited past. Yeats also considers there to be a major duration of time that lasts for two thousand solar years, a period he names the Great Year and represents by the Great Wheel. The Great Wheel passes through twenty-eight Phases of the moon, each of which is identified with various individuals.

Yeats represented these oppositions by cones and double "gyres" whose rising and falling movements span various durations of time: as one increases as the other decreases. Thus they demonstrate the crucial point to his system, that both the individual, and each historical period, always contain in varying degrees their opposite.¹⁵ In other words, there is never an absolute separation of *objective* and *subjective* and individuals always contain within themselves, to a lesser or greater extent, their own opposite. This opposite self, Yeats calls the anti-self, or Mask, as well as Daimon.

As Stephen Regan argues, an enduring fascination with spiritualism and the occult facilitated "the unusual convergence of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and Irish nationalism in the writing of Yeats" (Regan 72), and this is because "To espouse a belief in esoteric

¹⁴ In fact, Yeats's system is steeped in Nietzschean anti-rationalist ideas. These include the notion of the *Übermensch*, and the concept of existence as essentially tragic, an affirmation of the Heraclitean idea of cyclical history, the rejection of Cartesian dualism, and the re-affirmation of the body. See Otto Bohlmann, *Yeats and Nietzsche: An Exploration of Major Nietzschean Echoes in the Writings of William Butler Yeats* (Totawa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1982). See also Frances Nesbitt Oppel, *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche, 1902-10* (Charlottesville, UP of Virginia, 1987).

In all my references to Yeats's terminology in *A Vision*, I reproduce Yeats's italics.

¹⁵ The gyres represent what is essentially the concept of non-linear time, the Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence.

forms of knowledge was an implicit criticism of English materialism and utilitarianism” (72). Indeed, in his 1902 essay, “The Celtic Element in Literature,” where he quotes from Matthew Arnold’s *The Study of Celtic Literature*, Yeats writes: “the Celtic imaginativeness and melancholy are alike ‘a passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the despotism of fact’ ” (*E&I* 173). Not the least of the oppositions that influence Yeats’s representation of Herodias in his late plays, and in his many other works, is that between art that exists for its own sake, and art that expresses the otherness of Irish culture. The Salome-Herodias figure, redefined as the mystical *Irish* dancer in her many forms, is a symbol for art that is both transcendent, and an expression of Yeats’s Irish nationalism.¹⁶

While, in the Saidean sense, Mallarmé (and Gautier) appropriate the Oriental dancing Other as a symbol for art opposed to the status quo, Yeats, in a sense, *re*-appropriates her. (In fact, Edward Said regards Yeats’s early poetry in particular as anti-imperialist because of its imaginative recovery of the Irish landscape, and he champions Yeats as one of “the great nationalist artists of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, like Tagore, Senghor, Neruda, Vallejo, Césaire, Faiz, Darwish” [qtd. in Regan 69]).¹⁷ For example, the sadistic Queen in *A Full Moon in March* is

¹⁶ The Rhymers’ Club, which was founded by Yeats in London in 1890, became a focus of the Celtic revival. John O’Leary, who had aided Yeats in his 1888 edition *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, was present at its inaugural meeting, and it soon took on the agenda of a Celtic revival: apart from the Irish members T.W. Rolleston, A.C. Hillier, G.A. Greene, John Todhunter, there were also those who defined themselves as Celts: Symons and Rhys, John Davidson, Victor Plarr and Edwin Ellis. The Irish Literary Society was founded in London in 1891, the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892, the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897. For the background to the development of Yeats’s Irish nationalism, see Stephan Regan “W.B. Yeats and Irish Cultural Politics in the 1890s,” *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 66-84.

¹⁷ From Edward W. Said, “Yeats and Decolonization”(Derry: Field Day, 1988). See also Said’s revised version of this article in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993) 283, 287.

represented as an Irish archetype: a character named the First Attendant suggests to his counterpart that they sing of “An ancient Irish Queen / That stuck a head upon a stake” (*CP* 627). Helen Vendler points out, moreover, that the warrior beheaded in battle, an image from Celtic myth, was used by Yeats in *The Secret Rose* (1897); here the minstrel Aedh’s head is sliced off in battle, and it then sings in praise of Queen Dectira.¹⁸ In *A Full Moon in March*, a much later work, Yeats similarly reshaped this myth by transferring the role of executioner from an enemy in war to an Herodias translocated as a Celtic Queen. By blending myths from various sources, including classical, with Celtic myth, Yeats attempts to give substance not only to symbolic art, but also to his own conflicted identity. Although, like Verlaine (and Symons), he wished to “wring the neck” of rhetoric—to break free from a Victorian literary tradition—Yeats was ambivalent towards the *Symboliste/Décadent* movement; he did not wish to become a member of what he termed the “Tragic Generation,” the *fin-de-siècle* artists who succumbed either to early death or mental collapse. As Yeats puts it in his 1913 essay “Art and Ideas,”

I sought some symbolic language reaching into the [Celtic] past and associated with familiar names and conspicuous hills that I might not be alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses. (*E&I* 349)

Thus, where Yeats appropriates the dancing Herodias and re-presents her as a figure from Celtic myth, or as a supernatural element in the Irish landscape, she reveals, and *is*, the site of conflict. As a symbol for art’s virginal remoteness and self-generating essence, she is also ontologically ambiguous, obtrusive, seductive and deeply threatening.

Stephen Regan, however, considers that Said overstates the case, and overlooks Yeats’s contradictory views.

¹⁸ See Vendler 139. See also F.A.C. Wilson. Yeats himself stated that the play is about the mother goddess Cybele and the slain god (*FMM* v-vi).

Yeats's representations of dancers who symbolically castrate their suitors are entirely consistent with mid- to late-nineteenth-century misogynistic constructs of the Orientalised *femme fatale*; Yeats's works throughout are rich in images of women—dancers and non-dancers—who are essentially atavistic, Dionysian, animalistic, and symbiotic with nature and lunar forces. If thus Yeats's dancers show how his aesthetic converges, like Symons's or Gautier's, with prevailing *fin-de-siècle* gender attitudes, they also reveal the “feminine” essence of art that opposes the “masculine” bourgeois pursuits of what Yeats terms “the noisy set” comprised of “bankers, schoolmasters and clergymen” (CP 89). These women are, accordingly, the source of deep anxiety.

As Yeats's early poetry and plays show, the dancer as a seductive yet threatening figure was already preoccupying Yeats some time before he encountered her in the form of Mallarmé's Herodias. An example is Yeats's rendering of the Oisín legend in his narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889). Significantly, of the three hundred years Oisín passes in the Faery realm, the first is on the Island of Dancing, where Niamh promises him he will lead a considerable troupe of carefree dancers:

While a hundred youths, mighty of limb,
But knowing nor tumult nor hate nor strife,
And a hundred ladies, merry as birds,
Who when they dance to a fitful measure
Have a speed like the speed of the salmon herds,
Shall follow your horn and obey your whim.

(CP 412)

In other words, to dance is to express the quintessential otherness of Faery being: eternal youthfulness, freedom from earthly care, and a symbiosis with the natural world. To his interlocutor Saint Patrick, Oisín describes “a wild and sudden dance” (418) that makes its impetuous way through a lush and mystical Edenic landscape of which it almost seems an organic part (418-19) and whereby he and the other dancers “mocked at Time and Fate and Chance” (418). Thus dancing in the faery realm is also a celebration of apparent immortality in a seemingly eternal world of sensual pleasure; but, in fact, Oisín’s escape from mortal life is not permanent. After passing a further one hundred years on the Island of Victories, and another on the Island of Forgetfulness, Oisín longs to re-engage with the real, mortal world where he may again “move where the old men and young / In the Fenians’ dwellings of wattle lean on the chessboards and play,” and hear the “sweet” lash of “bald Conan’s slanderous tongue” (439). When Oisín does return, however, he finds everything that gave him identity has passed, and that he is an old man. Yeats describes him graphically as

... shaken with coughing and broken
 with old age and pain,
 Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with
 remembrance and fear;
 All emptied of purple hours as a beggar’s cloak in the rain,
 As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked
 under a weir.

Oisín has paid a high price for his three hundred years with Niamh: in the words of Saint Patrick, it has been a “dalliance with a demon thing” (409).

It is possible to dismiss Saint Patrick’s words as simply the voice of a repressive Christian morality to which Yeats opposes the Dionysian joys of an idealised pagan past, the realm of dream and imagination of which “poets sing” (409). This would be to posit his aesthetic as Gautierien—in other words, *l’art pour l’art* suffused with cultural nationalism. But unlike Gautier, and consistent with his view of conflict as the essence of consciousness, Yeats, like Symonds, saw not just bourgeois life, but also *everyday* life, in opposition to art; as he puts it in “The Choice”—a poem written much later, and included in his 1933 volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.

(CP 278)

Accordingly, Yeats’s portrayal of Niamh as the seductress who lures Oisín to Faeryland can be read as a metaphor for the threat of art to the poet’s autonomy. As Elizabeth Bergmann Loiseaux indicates, at the time of writing *Oisín*, Yeats was fascinated with W.M. Turner’s painting *The Golden Bough*, a work that depicts a scene from Virgil’s *Aeneid* (53).¹⁹ Where this painting features, in the middle ground, a circle of figures dancing amid the ruins of past civilisations, and in the foreground, beside a tree, a fox

¹⁹ In *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes: “I longed for pattern, ... for an allied art in poetry, and returned again and again to our National Gallery to gaze at Turner’s *Golden Bough* (81).”

playing with a snake, it depicts a Golden Age—a seemingly pre-lapsarian world—undermined by the images of decay and of the archetypal temptress, the Serpent-as-Eve. Thus it is likely that *The Golden Bough* nourished Yeats's ideas of dance as a symbol for art that transcends (and, as in *Oisín*, suspends) time amidst the ever-present threat of death and corruption. On one level, Yeats uses the Herodias figure as a symbol for the “raging in the dark” of the artist living in a late Victorian society that values the material over the metaphysical, the prosaic over the supernatural, the tangible over the symbolic, and—significantly—English industrialism over Irish pastoralism.

In his early play *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), for example, Yeats portrays the central character, Mary Bruin, as a woman who expresses her alienation from bucolic life through her desire to dance. But, in a curious parallel with Gautier's *Giselle* (a ballet that Yeats is unlikely to have seen), the love of dancing taken to excess is associated with the transgressiveness of the female, and her affiliation with nature and supernatural power.²⁰ Stultified by the joyless round of domestic chores, Mary invokes the faeries to transport her into their realm so she may be free to dance to the rhythms of nature:

Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!

Let me have all the freedom I have lost;

Work when I will and idle when I will!

Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,

For I would ride with you upon the wind,

(Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,)

²⁰ After the decline of the Romantic ballet in England *Giselle* was not performed in London until it was mounted in 1926 by the former *régisseur* of the Imperial theatres in St. Petersburg, Nikolai Sergueyev, on the Vic-wells Ballet, under the direction of Ninette de Valois. There seems to be no record of Yeats ever having seen *Giselle*.

And dance upon the mountains like a flame.

(*CPI* 61)

That Mary's dancing is bacchanalian, expressing her "natural" wantonness and her potential to destroy is indicated by Yeats's transposed imagery of unkempt hair, and his allusion to volcanic fire.

Even more important is the image of Mary riding the wind like the archetypal witch, an oblique reference to the Sidhe whom Yeats associates with the wind, and with "the daughters" of Herodias. In his notes to his poem "The Hosting of the Sidhe," Yeats writes:

The gods of ancient Ireland, the Tuatha De Danaan, or the Tribes of the goddess Dana, or Sidhe, from Aes Sidhe or Sluagh Sidhe, the people of the Faery Hills as these words are usually explained, still ride the country as of old. Sidhe is also the Gaelic for wind, and certainly the Sidhe have much to do with the wind. They journey in whirling wind, the winds that were called the dance of the daughters of Herodias in the Middle Ages, Herodias doubtless taking the place of some old goddess. When old people see the leaves whirling on the road, they bless themselves because they believe the Sidhe to be passing by. (*CP* 524)

Although Yeats reclaims the Irish landscape, he sees it as swept by a potentially dangerous force personified as supernatural, dancing women. By implication, if dancing woman is a trope for art, her location in the Irish landscape increases her threat; or, to put it another way, for Yeats, the appeal of Irish myth as a source of art lay in its images of female transgressive power. Either way, the Sidhe and the faery are yet other versions

of Romanticism's Orientalised Other. Indeed, in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, the dancing faery recalls not only Gautier's indefatigable dancing Other, the wili, but also his infantilised "Oriental" dancers. Indeed, it is a faery *child* who comes for Mary, and as can be seen when she calls to Bridget, Mary's mother-in-law, for her dancing shoes, she can seemingly dance interminably:

The Child. Put on my shoes, old mother
For I would like to dance now I have eaten.
The reeds are dancing by Coolaney Lake,
And I would like to dance until the reeds
And the white waves have danced themselves asleep.

(CPI 65)

Furthermore, like Niamh, the Faery Child is figured as antithetical to Christianity:

*Bridget puts on the shoes, and the Child is about to
dance, but suddenly sees the crucifix and shrieks and
covers her eyes.*

What is that ugly thing on the black cross?

(65)

Only after Father Hart complies with her request that he "Hide [the crucifix] away" (65-66) does the Faery Child dance, and then to her own sung accompaniment.

Thus she is, in a sense, a prototype Herodias: her dance, and her song, celebrating the wind's (and her) transforming power—"The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
/ The wind blows over the lonely of heart, / And the lonely of heart is withered away"
(66)—are self-referential. The point to be stressed here, though, is that if the Faery Child

is seen to symbolise art whose source lies in the pagan Irish landscape (significantly, she is “*strangely dressed, perhaps in faery green*” [VPI 186]), it is art whose mystical power has ambiguous consequences for those who invoke it. The play ends with Mary’s death, but her transfiguration is only implied: the stage directions tell us that “*Outside there are dancing figures, and it may be a white bird*” (72).²¹ The white bird is clearly a symbol of flight, the Romantic trope for the poetic imagination used by Gautier, and here allied to the movement of wind and the Sidhe. Importantly, it foreshadows Yeats’s adopted images of the Herodias figure dancing in her self-enclosed lunar sphere; in the parenthetical verse with which he closes *The Land of Heart’s Desire* Yeats includes the following lines: “... the faeries dance in a place apart, / Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring” (72).

Absent from *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, however, is the blatant eroticism of Niamh and the faeries who dance with the “daughters of Herodias” in “The Hosting of the Sidhe.” More condensed in its imagery—Yeats wrote it about five years after *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, and two years after being introduced to Mallarmé’s Herodias—“The Hosting of the Sidhe” powerfully evokes images of erotic female dancing to the accompaniment of the circular motion of the wind, and to Niamh’s siren call. Niamh’s italicised (and self-referential) song both suggests and provokes sexual arousal:

The host is riding from Knocknarea

Over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare;

²¹ Richard Ellmann points out that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) was written for Maud Gonne to act, and is a revised version of *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, “rewritten ... in terms of nationalism; just as the fair child lured Maire Bruin away from her husband, so Cathleen Ni Houlihan (the symbol of Ireland) wins Michael Gillane away from his prospective bride” (YMM 135).

Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
 And Niamh calling *Away, come away:*
Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart,
 The host is rushing 'twixt night and day,
 And where is there hope or deed as fair?
 Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
 And Niamh calling *Away, come away.*

(61)

The threat that Niamh and her Dionysian troupe pose to any man who should come upon them is clearly stated. That they have already deflected Caoilte from his course is indicated by his “riding” and “rushing,” and his repeated “tossing [of] his burning hair,” because, in a sense, Caoilte dances too, and thus has succumbed to their seductive but wayward feminine power.

It is interesting to note that the “rushing band” of indefatigable dancers who “whirl around” are defined by the same qualities that characterise Gautier’s vampire-wilis—the indefatigable, “cruelles danseuses” (*Ésd* 121) who destroy men. In other words, the

Sidhe are the “daughters” not only of Herodias—in his essay, appropriately entitled “The Untiring Ones,” Yeats writes of the tireless dancing feet of the Sidhe (*Myth* 77)—but also of the archetypal Romantic vampire whose habits are nocturnal, and whose domain is the untamed, sylvan landscape. (Likewise, the faeries dance tirelessly: *The King of the Great Clock Tower* opens with the Second Attendant’s announcement that “They dance all day that dance in Tir-nan-oge” [*CPI* 633].)

In his story “Rosa Alchemica,” Yeats actually does present the dancer as a vampiric figure who is reminiscent not only of the wilis, but also of Gautier’s other fictitious *vivantes-mortes*. The narrator is conducted by Michael Robartes to the west of Ireland to be initiated into the Order of the Alchemical Rose. Coming at last to a Temple where he finds himself in a room of dancers, he is soon overwhelmed by “a mysterious wave of passion, that seemed like the soul of the dance moving within ... [his] soul” (*Myth* 289). Just as Gautier’s narrator in “La Cafetière” is swept away in an ever-accelerating waltz with the living-dead Angéla, so Yeats’s narrator finds himself devoid of all sense of time and space as he dances with “an immortal august woman, who had black lilies in her hair.” He recalls that “as we danced on and on, the incense drifted over us and around us, covering us away as in the heart of the world, and ages seem to pass, and tempests to awake and perish in the folds of our robes and in her heavy hair” (289-90). (Although not specified as a waltz, in effect, the dance is similar, because it is danced in a circular room, and “wound in and out traversing on the floor the shapes of [rose] petals” [287, 288].) At last regaining his senses, the narrator recognises the dancer, to all intents and purposes, as a vampire who would drain him of his metaphysical essence:

Suddenly I remembered that her eyelids had never quivered, and that her lilies had not dropped a black petal, nor shaken from their places, and understood with a great horror that I danced with one who was more or less human, and who was drinking up my soul as an ox drinks up a wayside pool; and I fell, and darkness passed over me. (289-90)

All of Yeats's dancing women discussed so far conform in some degree to Gautier's Romantic constructs of woman-as-art, whether represented as Mary Bruin, Herodias and her "daughters," Niamh, and the shape-changing Sidh, or a *vivante-morte*. The dancer in "Rosa Alchemica," however, with her Medusan gaze, her sinister stillness within movement, and her threatening hair, is more akin to the *femme fatale* of the decadent imagination than to Gautier's seductive dancers. (Arguably, she colours Symons's retrospective view of Lydia). And if she is a more sinister figure than the Romantic dancers this is because, consistent with *fin-de-siècle* gender anxiety, Yeats's subject position is less secure than Gautier's. For all his Romantic yearning for subject/object fusion, Gautier maintains his vantage point as the subjective "I," and the release from patriarchal, bourgeois values that the dancer/art initiates is an ecstatic wish-fulfilment; for Yeats (as for Symons), however, the role of Symbolist writer brings neither unequivocal joy, nor ontological certainty.

Yeats's conflicting attitudes towards Symbolist art, and the creative process, can be inferred from his play *At the Hawk's Well*, first performed in 1916, ten years after he wrote "Rosa Alchemica." Here Yeats dramatises the coldly detached Herodias figure, not as a faery, vampire figure, or Queen "separate from everything heterogeneous," but as a composite figure. As the Hawk Woman—the Guardian of the Well—she is described by

Cuchulain as “bird, woman or witch” (216), and by the Old Man as “The Woman of the Sidhe herself” (214). As such, she embodies the paradox of symbolic art that is not “casual,” but intensely focussed in its multiple allusiveness. And this focus is reinforced by the play itself. *At the Hawk's Well* is the first, not only of Yeats's *Plays for Dancers*, but also of his Noh plays, and it is notable for its spare and highly anti-realist form. In not the least of his departure from realism, Yeats presents the Hawk Woman as made-up to appear as if she were wearing a mask.²² This has the effect of dramatising, in both senses of the word, her ontological ambiguity, and of signalling visually the impassive cruelty and iconic detachment that identifies her as the symbolic Herodias-as-art. Moreover, as the stage directions tell us, she moves “like a hawk” (216), and that, at the climax of the play, she actually dances.²³ Thus, the Herodias figure becomes a tangible,

²² The effect of masks in dehumanising the performers as symbolic figures is heightened by Yeats's requirement that they move like marionettes. *At the Hawk's Well* was first performed in 1916, and consistent with his newly developed theories on drama, Yeats insisted that it be presented in a friend's drawing room, and that “only those who cared for poetry were invited” (VP 416). Yeats explores his ideas about drama as a symbolist medium and his attraction to Noh theatre in his essays “Certain Noble Plays of Japan” (E&I 221-237) and “The Tragic Theatre” (E&I 238-245). For discussions on the influence of Noh on Yeats's dramaturgy see Richard Taylor *The Drama of W.B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976). See also Hiro Ishibashi *Yeats and the Noh: Types of Japanese Beauty and Their Reflection in Yeats's Plays*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (Dolmen Press, 1966). For discussions on Ezra Pound's part in introducing Yeats to Noh theatre see Richard Ellmann *Yeats the Man and the Masks* (London: Macmillan, 1949) 215-218.

²³ The part of the Hawk woman was first performed by the Japanese dancer Michio Ito, who, for authenticity, studied the movement of hawks at the London zoo. That the part of the Hawk woman was originally played by a man does not mitigate the role's representation of female malevolence, since Ito's dancing is in a sense “feminine” by virtue of its Oriental otherness. Importantly, Yeats's notes on *At the Hawk's Well* reveal that he saw Ito's dancing as particularly suited to his theories on drama: he writes that Ito's “minute intensity of movement in the dance of the hawks [was] well suited to our small room and private art” (VPI 417). Nonetheless, the seeming paradox of a man dancing the part of seductress is one consistent with the complexities and idiosyncracies of Yeats's system. On a more practical level, Ito had been trained in Noh theatre, and for that reason appealed to Yeats as a performer who could best fulfil the aesthetic demands of the role.

It is important to note that, in the late nineteen-twenties, the Hawk Woman was performed by the Irish dancer Edris Stannus, who by then had taken the name, Ninette de Valois. In *The Drama of W.B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No*, Richard Taylor recalls de Valois describing to him her dance in the 1933 revival of *At the Hawk's Well*. In his words,

She danced barefoot in the modern style then known as abstract impressionism. And the choreography was created to express the emotional content of the mask through stylized forms. Both

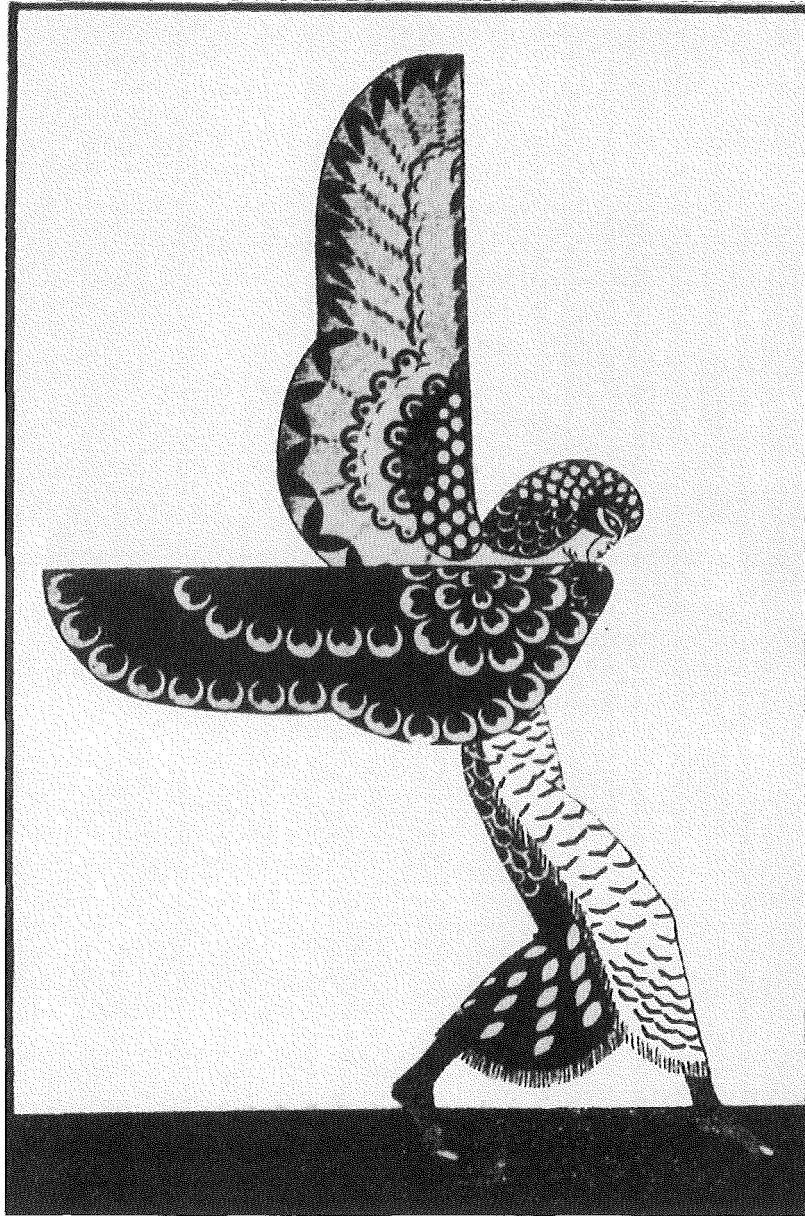


Fig. 10. Edmund Dulac's design for the Hawk Woman's costume
in *At the Hawk's Well*.

embodied symbol for art that tantalises its victim, and ultimately condemns him to a life of unmitigated discontent and suffering. (On another level, the play is also an extended metaphor for Yeats's essentially Nietzschean view of life as tragic.)

Although it is the third of the plays in which Yeats deals with the Cuchulain myth, *At the Hawk's Well* relates the first episode in the saga when the hubristic young Cuchulain goes to the Well in order to drink its immortalising waters. There he finds the Old Man who, for fifty years, has waited in vain for the water that only very occasionally flows from the well, and his antagonist, the Guardian of the Well—the Hawk Woman—who is dedicated to preventing any mortal from drinking. Despite the Old Man's warnings, Cuchulain succumbs to the Hawk Woman's power: at the very moment the elusive waters appear, he is lured away from the well by her prolonged dance (CPI 216-17).

It seems obvious that the ontologically ambiguous Hawk Woman is yet another manifestation of the Eve figure mentioned in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, who deprives man of the apple, and that the regenerating water of the well is symbolic of a feminised creative force. Thus the sexual and aesthetic converge: the figure of the Hawk Woman can be seen to personify, or embody, art as the cruel and unattainable *femme fatale* who taunts man with her creative, and regenerative, essence but never bestows it. Moreover, she is actively retributive towards those who pursue it: the play ends with the Hawk Woman rousing the female warrior Aiofe, and the "fierce women of the hills" against Cuchulain. The Old Man warns Cuchulain that they wish "to take your life, /

movement and maintained emotion were determined by the fact of the Hawk's hood, and the dance progressed from an evocation of brooding power, through suggestive seduction, to the violent ecstasy of a wild bird. (130)

And never till you are lying in the earth / Can you know rest” (218). The price art exacts from those who pursue its essence is a life of torment, and non-fulfilment, as the Old Man has discovered: “You have deluded me my whole life through, / Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life” (218). As the musicians’ song shows, through pursuing the unattainable, Cuchulain can never have a normal life:

He has lost what may not be found

Till men heap his burial-mound

And all the history ends.

He might have lived at his ease,

An old dog’s head on his knees,

Among his children and friends.

(217)

It becomes clear to us that the Hawk Woman—art personified—is an extreme danger to family life when the Old Man warns Cuchulain that she would destroy Cuchulain’s children, either by tearing their throats out, or by driving him to such madness that he would kill them himself (214-15). In fact, Cuchulain does kill his son, albeit unwittingly, and the aftermath of that event is the concern of Yeats’s third play for dancers, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (also a Noh play, and first performed in 1919, three years after *At the Hawk’s Well*). Cuchulain, “mad with sorrow” (CPI 284), has thrown himself into the sea to battle the waves, and, having been finally swept ashore, now exists in a prolonged state of unconsciousness.²⁴ Taking up the story at this point, *The*

²⁴ It is relevant to note that *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is a sequel to *On Baile’s Strand*, a play Yeats wrote in 1904. Where this earlier play deals with the events that lead up to those in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*—Cuchulain’s killing of his son, and his ensuing madness and collapse into unconsciousness—it is notable for its poetic images of the dancing Sidhe that, like those in the earlier

Only Jealousy of Emer tells how Cuchulain's wife, Emer, has sent for Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's mistress, in the hope that she can raise Cuchulain from his stupor. Emer knows that the body stretched upon the death-bed is not Cuchulain's, but a "sea-borne log bewitched into his likeness" (285) that Eithne Inguba senses to be "some evil thing" (287). Indeed, the simulacrum is Bricriu, one of the champions of the mythological Red Branch, the ancient order of heroic knights, and when he uses his supernatural powers to reveal the real Cuchulain in the form of a ghost, he acts not in the interest of mortals, but in his own. He has sworn enmity against Fand (described as a "Woman of the Sidhe") who subsequently appears and dances seductively around Cuchulain in order to draw him from mortal reach. To thwart Fand, Bricriu tells Emer that he will save Cuchulain, but, consistent with his disruptive nature, he exacts his price, and Emer must renounce Cuchulain's love for ever. This Emer does, and the play ends with the reunion of husband and lover, rather than of husband and wife.

Because of its outcome—the disruption of "normal" marriage relations—it is tempting to read *The Only Jealousy of Emer* simply as Yeats's wish-fulfilment: Emer (Georgie Hyde-Lees) sacrifices Cuchulain (Yeats) to Eithne Inguba (Maud Gonne). This would be to ignore the fact that Gonne not only took the hawk as her symbol, but also identified herself as a woman of the Sidhe, and that she should therefore be associated with Fand.²⁵ In a letter to Yeats, dated March 21, 1916, Gonne writes, obviously in

poetry, also prefigure Yeats's later performed versions. (*On Baile's Strand* is not a dance play, and there is no actual dancing.) Conchubar, Cuchulain's adversary, speaks of "the Shape-Changeers that run upon the wind" (*VPI* 495), and the female chorus sings of the women who are "but the whirling wind" and who in their "many shapes" cast spells and ruin men (495, 497). Furthermore, Cuchulain blames the "pale windy people" (522) for the death of his son.

²⁵ When writing *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, Yeats had been married to Georgie Hyde-Lees for less than two years. Gregory N. Eaves also reads Fand as Maud Gonne and Emer as Yeats's wife, with Eithne Inguba as Iseult Gonne. See Eaves, *Yeats* 13, 36.

response to an earlier comment he had made to *At the Hawk's Well*, "I did not feel at all surprised when you told me about the hawk influence. ... It has been my symbol which I designated in a certain occult work" (*GYL* 370); and in her autobiography, *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne notes that the Donegal peasants associated her with the Sidhe (Gonne 134).

I discuss Gonne's influence on Yeats's aesthetic later in the chapter, but of relevance at this point are Yeats's representations, in *Emer*, of the Sidhe and of the Herodias figure. Again, we see the supernatural Sidhe—the "daughters of Herodias"—as remarkable for their ambiguity and mutability; to use Cuchulain's term from *On Baile's Strand*, they are "Shape-Changers" (*CPI* 267). And although Bricriu is a male being, he is allied with them: in his words, "I am named Bricriu—not the man—that Bricriu / Maker of discord among gods and men, / Called Bricriu of the Sidhe" (287). Moreover, Fand is recognised by Cuchulain's ghost as the Guardian of the Well—"long ago / I met you on a cloudy hill / Beside old thorn-trees, and a well. / A woman danced and a hawk flew" (292)—as well as being implicitly linked to the Sidhe at the play's opening where the First Musician sings of female beauty as "like a white / Frail bird" (281). That the hawk is the predatory aspect of what is essentially a supernatural, transmutable force is confirmed in reference to Yeats's writings on Mary Hynes. Yeats writes that, according to Irish folk lore, the legendary white-skinned beauty (*Myth* 26) "died young because the gods loved her, for the Sidhe are the gods" (28), and thus she is reclaimed by her own kind, because female beauty "was thought to come from the Sidhe, and bring fortune with it" (30).

As Fand, moreover, the dancer in *Emer* appears as neither bird, nor witch, nor elemental being. Yeats stresses in his stage directions that she dances in an “inhuman,” presumably puppet-like manner, thereby revealing her status as artefact:

At moments she may drop her hair upon his head, but she does not kiss him. She is accompanied by string and flute and drum. Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair too, must keep the metallic suggestion. (291)

This Fand is clearly a Yeatsian version of the shimmering jewel-adorned Salome portrayed by Gustave Moreau, described by Huysmans in *A Rebours*, and adopted by Symons, thus verifying her *Symboliste/Décadent* heritage. That she actually wears a mask (as opposed to the make-up worn by the Hawk Woman) amplifies her anti-naturalistic appearance and her affinity with Mallarmé’s aloof Herodias, as does her image as the source of lunar emanations. In the words of the Ghost of Cuchulain,

Who is it stands before me there
Shedding such light from limb and hair
As when the moon, complete at last
With every labouring crescent past,
And lonely with extreme delight
Flings out upon the fifteenth night?

(291)

Because Fand is associated with the full moon, she clearly prefigures the Queen in *A Full Moon in March*; that her incandescent completeness occurs on the “fifteenth

night,” moreover, establishes her significance as a dancer, specifically, in relation to Yeats’s system as codified in *A Vision*. As the source and embodiment of lunar power, in other words the self-created art object, she belongs to the Fifteenth Phase, the phase of the full moon, when pure beauty and Unity of Being are achieved. In Yeats’s words,

Body of Fate and *Mask* are now identical; and *Will* and *Creative Mind* identical; or rather the *Creative Mind* is dissolved in the *Will* and the *Body of Fate* in the *Mask*. Thought and will are indistinguishable, effort and attainment are indistinguishable; ... nothing is apparent but dreaming *Will* and the image that it dreams. ... As all effort has ceased, all thought has become image. (*AV* 135)

According to Yeats’s system, this means that all antinomies are harmonised and transformed as pure beauty: in other words, the conflicts between contemplation and action, subjective and objective experience, body and soul, are resolved. Thus Fand symbolises Yeats’s ideal of non-mimetic art, art that shows no imprint of its creator (the dancer *is* the dance), that unifies the natural and the supernatural, the worldly and the transcendent, and that “fill[s] our thoughts with the essence of things, and not with things” (*E&I* 193).

Moreover, as a version of the dancing Salome-Herodias, Fand represents what Yeats suggests is the perfection of civilisation in which the celebration of the body is inseparable from worship of the spiritual. Referring to “the moment before revelation”—the period immediately preceding the birth of Christ—Yeats notes,

I think of Salome ... dancing before Herod and receiving the prophet’s head in her indifferent hands, and wonder if what seems to us decadence was not

in reality the exaltation of the muscular flesh and of civilisation perfectly achieved. (*AV* 273)

That the “essence of things” (there are obvious Platonic resonances) has its source in the body is a paradox central to Yeats’s aesthetic, and one in which he found a precedent in the idea of Christ as God incarnate. “It is still true that the Deity gives us, according to His promise, not His thoughts or His convictions but His flesh and blood,” Yeats writes in “Certain Noble Plays of Japan”; and he goes on to say, “We only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body” (*E&I* 235). Implicitly, divinity grounded in the body is an article of faith in art-as-religion, and the dancer is a symbol of art because, Christ-like, her medium *is* her body. This belief in the body as a source of the divine Yeats expounds further in a later essay (1928) written against censorship.²⁶ Here, in reference to the differences between Byzantine and Renaissance representations of the human figure, he rejects the body/soul duality posited by Descartes and Plato, and supports Aquinas’s view of the soul as residing within the body. Perversely (given his choice of Byzantium as his historical ideal), Yeats disdains Byzantine art for its denial of the body because it portrays Christ “with a face of pitiless intellect,” the Virgin Mary as a “pinched, flat-breasted” woman holding “a child like a wooden doll,” and saints with “thought-tortured faces and bodies that were but a framework to sustain the patterns and colours of their clothes” (*UP* 2: 478). By contrast, because they were inspired by sexual passion (and, implicitly, because they are individualised, and belong to an antithetical Phase of history),

²⁶ To support his ideas of mind and body unity Yeats also turned to Eastern thought. His first principle to “A General Introduction for My Work,” contains a direct quote from the Prashna Upanishad: “When mind is lost in the light of the Self ... it dreams no more; still in the body it is lost in happiness” (*E&I* 509).

Renaissance artists created sensual art that celebrated the physical reality of their subjects, an example being Titian who “saw grow upon his canvas an entirely voluptuous body” (2: 478). For Yeats, the essence of true art is its sensual appeal, the antithesis of which is abstract, disembodied thought. In his essay entitled, appropriately, “The Thinking of the Body,” he reinforces this idea by personifying art:

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematical form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. (*E&I* 292)

As Frank Kermode points out, Yeats was haunted by the lines in Donne’s “The Second Anniversary. Of the progress of the Soule” that refer to Elizabeth Drury: “pure and eloquent blood / Spoke in her cheekes, and so distinctly wrought, / That one might say, her bodie thought” (243-46). Here Yeats found a compelling precedent for his idea of thought originating in the body (an idea reinforced by his readings of Blake and Nietzsche) and also for the gendered basis of his aesthetic, the notion that “flesh and bone” thought is essentially feminine, whereas disembodied thought—abstraction, objectivity and ratiocination—is essentially masculine. Indeed, in his system, the conflict that Yeats saw as essential to consciousness is *gendered* conflict, or, put another way, the conflict *of* gender. Where the *Will* and the *Creative Mind* are related to the external world and objective ideas, they are deemed masculine, and where *Mask* and *Body of Fate* are related to the individual’s self-image and inherited past, they are feminine.²⁷ (I

²⁷ Yeats’s ideas echo the utterances of Nietzsche’s hero Zarathustra in “Of the Despisers of the Body,” where he says “I am body entirely, and nothing beside; and soul is only a word for something in the body,” and “The body is a great intelligence, a multiplicity with one sense” (*TSZ* 61).

reproduce Yeats's italics.) Furthermore, passing as they do through the twenty-eight Phases of the Moon, both the Great Wheel and the Great Year are directed spiritually by the *Thirteenth Cone*, which, in turn, is associated with the feminine principle. (As Gloria C. Kline points out, because it is governed by lunar forces, and was developed from his wife's automatic writing, Yeats's system is feminine, not only in an archetypal and mythological sense, but also in a direct sense [Kline 124].)

At first, it may seem a paradox that, for Yeats, the *female* dancer symbolises embodied, spiritual art, and the Unity of Being in which, by implication, masculine and feminine principles are harmonised. But as his works show, no less than Gautier and Symons (and the *Symbolistes/Décadents* in general) Yeats sees the woman who dances as allied to nature, governed by the non-rational, and attuned to supernatural forces, thereby symbolising art as the antithesis of bourgeois values and, in Yeats's case, patriarchal English Imperialism. But for Yeats, the dancer's non-discursive "language" of the body also symbolises "feminine" consciousness as the antithesis of the specifically "masculine" impulsion to abstract thought. According to his system, the active self—the self that engages with the world, and uses the intellect in order to create—is driven by the "masculine" *Will*, whereas the perfection it seeks is its opposite, the anti-self that is the "feminine" *Mask*. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* this gendered conflict with the anti-self is described graphically in terms of sexual engagement between the poet and his calling. Yeats writes: "There is a deep enmity between man and his destiny, and ... man loves nothing but his destiny." Then, substituting Heraclitus's term for destiny, he goes on to say that, "the Daimon delivers and deceives us" (*Myth* 336). Finally, in reference to Blake, Yeats writes that "it may be 'sexual love,' which is 'founded upon spiritual hate,'

is an image of the warfare of man and Daimon, and I even wonder if there may be some secret communion, some whispering in the dark between Daimon and sweetheart” (336).

The idea of the poet engaged in “sexual” conflict with his “feminine” Daimon is yet another analogy for Yeats’s idea of consciousness as conflict, and one allied to the creation of symbolic verse. As he puts it, “We make out of our quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (*Myth* 331). Moreover, the “raging in the dark” that the poet suffers when he chooses (symbolic) art over normal life is the result of having to privilege “masculine” abstract consciousness in order to create the “feminine” art work. The instability of identity that Yeats feared as the fate of “The Tragic Generation” was fuelled by the anxiety surrounding constructs of gender that contributed to *fin-de-siècle* fears of social collapse.

For an insight into Yeats’s anxiety about identity and gender, it is revealing to consider briefly his relationship with Lady Augusta Gregory. As his patron and collaborator, and his primary source of Irish folklore, Lady Gregory not only promoted Yeats as an Irish writer, but also enabled him to develop his self-image as an artist in the Renaissance mould (and by implication to create the *embodied* image). As Kline notes, when Lady Gregory introduced her protégé to Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, she gave him an historical precedent for the idea of the artist as aristocrat, and it was after they visited Urbino together in 1907 that Yeats wrote of Lady Gregory as a kind of Duchess of Montefeltro, and of Coole Park as a modern day Urbino.²⁸ Nonetheless, Lady Gregory exerted a power over Yeats that extended well beyond that engendered by professional

²⁸ Yeats acknowledges his debt to Lady Gregory, and her contribution to Irish culture, in “Dramatis Personae” (*Au* 385-458).

interest, and, as Kline demonstrates, this power was interpreted by his contemporaries as both maternal and mythic. Walter Starkie describes Lady Gregory's relationship to Yeats as that of mother, and names her "Egeria" (the goddess of fountains who counselled the Roman King Numa), and Oliver St. John Gogarty sees her as encircling Yeats with a lunar force, a remarkably apt response given Yeats's idea that creativity is essentially feminine and lunar.²⁹ Indeed, Yeats himself pays tribute to Lady Gregory's influence in the poem "Coole Park, 1929" where he describes her as providing a fixed point—a centre in all senses of the word—not just for him, but also for a number of men who "came like swallows and like swallows went" (*CP* 274). It is Lady Gregory's "powerful character" that

Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass point,
Found certainty upon the dreaming air.

(274)

Furthermore, on a more mundane level, in *Autobiographies*, Yeats characterises his relationship with Lady Gregory as that of disciplining mother and indolent son. Of his first summer at Coole Park, when he was recovering from a bout of ill-health, Yeats recalls that he asked Lady Gregory "to send me to my work every day at eleven, and at some other hour to my letter, rating me with idleness if need be" (*Au* 377). He then observes, "I doubt if I should have done much with my life but for her firmness and care" (377).

²⁹ Kline quotes Oliver St. John Gogarty as having said that Lady Gregory's "lunar encirclement of

Yeats's acceptance of Lady Gregory's maternal power and influence brought with it a measure of anxiety, and a considerable degree of guilt, however. His acceptance of her financial support, as well as her gifts of furniture and provisions (*Au* 408), contributed to what James Pethica suggests are Yeats's feelings of being "unmanned" (Pethica 175). According to Pethica, Yeats saw Lady Gregory as usurping the traditionally male prerogative of exercising economic power, a reversal of traditional gender relations that was scarcely mitigated by her own claims to authorship that, by inference, were her appropriation of yet another "masculine" role.³⁰ Indeed, in his journal, Yeats describes Lady Gregory as "mother, friend, sister and *brother*" (*Mem* 160-1, my emphasis), and her *Kincora* he praises as "unlike a woman's work" (*CL* 3: 630).³¹ Moreover, that "Women feared her" (*Au* 372) implies that, as an authority (and *authorial*) figure, Lady Gregory's nature was in some measure "masculine," and outside "feminine" norms.

The woman who most graphically reveals Yeats's conflict of consciousness as essentially gender conflict, however, is Maud Gonne, the woman with whom Yeats had a life-long obsession. Identified by Yeats as the cause of the "troubling" of his life (*Mem* 40), Gonne haunts much of his work, and, importantly, she informs his highly ambiguous representations of the Herodias figure as an aesthetic symbol. In short,

Yeats made his friends moonstruck" (102).

³⁰ The extent to which Yeats and Lady Gregory collaborated is not entirely clear. They certainly worked together on the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. For a discussion on the nature of Yeats's relationship with Lady Gregory—its benefits as well as its personal and professional tensions—see James Pethica, "Patronage and Creative Exchange: Yeats, Lady Gregory and the Economy of Indebtedness," *Yeats and Women*, Deirdre Toomey, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997) 168-204.

³¹ Yeats's remarks are from his entry in 1909 when he received news that Lady Gregory was ill. Significantly, he at first thought it was his own mother who was ill, but then remembered that she had been dead a number of years.

although Gonne is the source of conflict, she is also the catalyst for Yeats's idealised notion of Unity of Being—the unattainable resolution of all antinomies.

By the time Yeats met Maud Gonne in 1889, he was thoroughly steeped in concepts of Romantic love, and images of idealised women. Of his youth, he recalls, “I had gathered from the Romantic poets an idea of perfect love. Perhaps I should never marry in church, but I would love one woman all my life” (*Mem* 32); and it is Pre-Raphaelite images of women that inform his recollections that, for him and his fellow members of the Rhymers' Club, “Woman herself was ... in our eyes ... romantic and mysterious, still the priestess of her shrine, our emotions remembering the *Lilith* and the *Sibylla Palmifera* of Rossetti” (*Au* 302). (In his sixteenth year, Yeats had been introduced to Rossetti's works by his father.) Thus, as Kline puts it, Maud Gonne stepped “into a role already prepared in [Yeats's] imagination” (Kline 49). Of his first impressions of her, Yeats writes:

I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the blossoms of apples, and yet face and body had the lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age, and a stature so great that she seemed of a divine race. (*Mem* 40)

Furthermore, Yeats considered that Gonne's “movements were worthy of her form,” and he “understood at last why the poet of antiquity ... sings, loving some lady, that she paces like a goddess” (40). Although she does not actually dance, Gonne conforms to Yeats's ideal as a living work of art by expressing beauty through her body. As a further example, where he writes of her political activities, Yeats sees Gonne's power to move a

crowd as that of physical eloquence; she is an example of bodily thought that for him is analogous to incarnate, symbolic art:

Her beauty, backed by her great stature, could instantly affect an assembly,
 ... her face, like the face of some great statue, showed little thought, her
 whole body seemed a master-work of long labouring thought, as though a
 Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and
 mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might outface even Artemisia's
 sepulchral image with a living norm. (*Au* 364-5)

Here, Yeats views Gonne with the same gaze with which Gautier “freezes” the dancer as a sculptured artefact; thus he likewise objectifies woman as an icon of idealised beauty. Even more to the point, this image of Gonne allies her with Yeats's Herodias figures: when placed in relation to his system, she is akin to the dancers who unify the contraries of dynamic movement within stillness attributable to ancient sculpture. In a number of earlier poems—“Rose of the World” for example—Yeats identifies Gonne as Helen of Troy; in *A Vision*, Helen of Troy, along with Burne-Jones's pre-Raphaelite women, belongs to Phase Fourteen, when “Thought is disappearing into image” (132-3). Accordingly, such women are on the brink of achieving the impossible state of complete antithetical beauty associated with the inhuman Phase Fifteen. Interestingly, Elizabeth Butler Cullingham suggests that it is Gonne's daughter Iseult who belongs to Phase Fifteen, and Gonne to Phase Sixteen.³² This is where, according to Yeats, “beautiful women, whose bodies have taken upon themselves the image of the true *Mask*,” belong

³² Cullingford notes that she disagrees with Richard Ellman, who assigns Iseult Gonne to the Sixteenth Phase. See Cullingford 226, n.5.

(*AV* 139). Such women have a “radiant intensity”; they “walk like queens, and seem to carry upon their backs a quiver of arrows”; they “are gentle only to those they have chosen or subdued”; and their “‘virginity renews itself like the moon’” (139-140). Indeed, this description alludes even more powerfully to the cold and mythical Gonne who rejected Yeats and who, although close to the fifteenth Phase, has adopted an alienated intellect. Unlike Helen of Troy, women of Phase Sixteen consciously bring about the deaths of the men who serve them.³³

According to Yeats, Maud Gonne “*hated* her own beauty, ... its image in the mirror” (*Au* 365, my emphasis). This is because “Beauty is from the antithetical self” and therefore “it calls for the denial or the dissolution of the self” (365). It is worth noting, therefore, that this dissolution of self—the engulfment by the whole—is associated with the *Primary*, feminine phase in Yeats’s system, and that it recalls the Kristevan notion of *jouissance*. Unlike Gautier, however, Yeats—like Symons—fears rather than welcomes a “feminine” loss of self, and arguably, he projects this fear onto Gonne. (Kline gives Yeats’s relationship with Gonne a Jungian interpretation, suggesting that Yeats projected an unconscious archetypal concept upon Gonne and that thus she was Yeats’s mirror image [Kline 10].) Not only is this loss of self “feminine,” it is the chosen sacrifice of woman who fulfils her “true” role which is to reflect man’s (Yeats’s) thoughts, and to take her symbolic place as a unifying principle, in other words, his projected sexual, and artistic ideal of woman both *as* art, and as a symbol *for* art. In the opening stanza of his poem “On Woman,” for example, Yeats makes clear the specific form of woman’s self-sacrifice:

³³ For an explanation of Phases Fifteen and Sixteen in relation to women, see Kline 120-123.

May God be praised for woman
 That gives up all her mind,
 A man may find in no man
 A friendship of her kind
 That covers all he has brought
 As with her flesh and bone
 Nor quarrels with a thought
 Because it is not her own.

(CP 164-5)

Because of Gonne's deep involvement in the Irish Republican movement and her refusal of Yeats's numerous proposals of marriage, she obviously does not conform to this ideal.³⁴ Paradoxically, Yeats's goddess is also the kind of woman he reviled: the opinionated, intellectual and politically engaged "masculine"—and emasculating—woman whose mind is dissociated from her body. In his diary of 1909, Yeats writes of Gonne:

I fear for her renewed devotion to any opinion. Women, because the main event in their lives has been giving of themselves, give themselves to an opinion as if [it] were some terrible stone doll. ... [O]pinions become as their children or their sweethearts, and the greater their emotional nature the more do they forget all other things. They grow cruel, as if [in] defence of lover or

³⁴ In her biography *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne acknowledges her lack of introspection and her single-minded devotion to the cause of Irish independence:

I never indulged in self-analysis and often used to get impatient with Willie Yeats, who, like all writers, was terribly introspective and tried to make me so. "I have no time to think of myself," I told him which was literally true, for, unconsciously perhaps, I had redoubled work to avoid thought. (Gonne 287)

child, this is done for something other than human life. At last the opinion becomes so much a part of them that it is as though a part of their flesh becomes, at it were, stone, and much of their being passes out of life. ... Women should have play with dolls finished in childish happiness, for if they play with them again it is amid hatred and malice. (*Mem* 192)³⁵

By fixating on ideas, then, Gonne petrifies her (embodied) essence as a woman: she denies her sexuality, she rejects her role as Yeats's lover, and, by implication, like the Hawk Woman with whom she identifies, prevents the *generation* of art. My emphasis on procreation is deliberate, because, according to Yeats, in single-mindedly pursuing her political ideals, Gonne allies herself with the class of people who disavow creativity through the exercise of abstract intellect, and, for him, this is tantamount to castration:

The political class in Ireland—the lower middle-class from whom the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for the past ten years—have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent of the removal of the genitals. ... They contemplate all creative power as the eunuchs contemplate Don Juan as he passes through hell on the white horse. (*Mem* 176)

In this passage Yeats does not directly refer to Maud Gonne; but in the poems and plays that feature dancers as the “castrating” Herodias figure—Hawk Woman, witch, or

³⁵ Yeats's disapproval of women playing an active political and military role in promoting the Irish nationalist cause underlies his poem “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz.” Of the results of the Gore-Booth sisters' involvement in the 1916 Easter uprising, he writes: “The older is condemned to death, / Pardoned, drags out lonely years / Conspiring among the ignorant,” and that “the younger dreams— / Some vague utopia—and she seems, / When withered old and skeleton-gaunt, / An image of

the Sidhe—Gonne is either an implicit, or an explicit presence. The series of antinomies that contribute to Yeats's conflict of consciousness—all of which can be subsumed under the art/life dichotomy—are derived from, and played out, in his relationship with her. Furthermore, in many of Yeats's poems or plays which feature the Herodias figure, Gonne functions as the antithetical principle in a dialectical process whereby the work itself is the synthesis. In other words, the poetry that Yeats produces out of the quarrel with himself self-reflexively draws attention to that process, and where they have a dialectical structure, the idea of Unity of Being that the dancer symbolises, becomes, in a real sense, the fusion of life (Yeats's experience) and art (the poem he creates).

As Elizabeth Cullingford points out, in a number of poems, namely "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," "Long-legged Fly," "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," and "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," it is Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult whom Yeats identifies with the dancer (Cullingford 230). In a sense, then, Iseult *is* the daughter of Herodias; and, in particular, in two of the poems—"Michael Robartes and the Dancer" and "To a Child Dancing in the Wind"—her mother is an implied presence.³⁶ (That Yeats proposed to Iseult supports that suggestion that he conflated the images of mother and daughter.) For example, where "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" opens with the line "Opinion is not worth a rush" and continues with the extended metaphor of the knight fighting the "dragon" of the lady's thought "That every morning rose again / And dug its claws and shrieked and fought" (*CP* 197), arguably, Maud Gonne is the lady, and Yeats the knight. Indeed, the knight "Loved the lady," and hoped that "the impossible [would]

such politics." That Yeats sets these images against that of "Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle" (*CP* 263) is consistent with his belief in woman's symbolic role.

³⁶ Jeffares states that the poem was actually written in celebration of Maud Gonne's youth. See *CCP* 169.

come to pass,” and that she “would have time to turn her eyes / Her lover thought, upon the glass / And on the instant would grow wise” (197). In these words, we hear Yeats’s voice, his wish that Gonne would abjure abstract thought and instead cultivate her beauty, her essence as woman, and thereby lead him to fulfil his intellectual, spiritual and creative potential.³⁷ That Yeats is positing his idea of “feminine” embodied thought is underlined by Robartes’ rebuttal of the girl’s remark “I have heard said / There is great danger in the body,” and his reference to the transubstantiation: “Did God in portioning wine and bread / Give man His thought or His mere body?” (198). Where Yeats’s notion of embodied thought is sustained throughout the poem, Robartes’ final words on ideal woman as a unified being are given the authority of a “Latin text” from which it “follows,” he declares,

That blest souls are not composite,
And that all beautiful women may
Live in uncomposite blessedness,
And lead us to the like—if they
Will banish every thought....

(198)

There is, however, an implied paradox in Robartes’s representation of Gonne. To the girl’s question “May I not put myself to college?” Robartes instructs her to

Go pluck Athene by the hair;

³⁷ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford suggests that there is irony in Robartes’ remarks, because, as an abstract principle, Gonne does enable Yeats to fulfil his potential. The extent to which a speaker and the poet are one is always contestable, and, perhaps because of Robartes’s blatant sexism, not all critics accept that Robartes’s words are Yeats’s. See Cullingford “Yeats and Women: *Michael Robartes and the*

For what mere book can grant a knowledge
 With an impassioned gravity
 Appropriate to that beating breast,
 That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?

(197)

The reference to the virgin goddess Athena with her implied long hair suggests the idealised Gonne, albeit of disembodied intellect; in a later poem, “Beautiful Lofty Things,” Yeats remembers her as “Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head” (CP 348). (His perception of Gonne as a Pre-Raphaelite beauty was no doubt, in part, because she had an abundance of long, wavy hair.)³⁸ But just as the “dreaming eye” recalls the iconic dancer’s otherworldly detachment and the static gaze of the masked face, so the “beating breast” and the “vigorous thigh,” with their connotations of limbs moving and loss of breath, suggest dance and knowledge expressed through the body. Thus there is an implied allusion to the shape-changing Sidhe. If, as Cullingford suggests, there *is* irony in Robartes’s words, they highlight the fact that, for all his theorising, Yeats recognises that he cannot resolve the paradoxes he sees (and fears) in *all* women as abstract principles. Gonne emasculates by holding fast to abstract “opinion”; the seemingly “uncomposite” woman who embodies thought—and art—emasculates by her remoteness and by her all-encompassing femaleness.

Dancer,” *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (London: Macmillan, 1997). See also John Harwood “Secret Communion,” *Yeats and Women*, ed. Deirdre Toomey (London: Macmillan, 1997) 252-80.

³⁸ In her autobiography, Gonne notes: “At fourteen, I was five foot ten and, having a great desire to be grown up, I made Nurse lengthen my skirts and dress the masses of my golden-brown hair in great coils at the back of my head” (Gonne 27).

That Yeats's image of the dancer as a threatening figure reflects his conflicting feelings about Gonne is also apparent in "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," a poem he addressed directly to Iseult. As the title suggests, Yeats identifies the young dancer with the Sidhe, and this is confirmed in the final two lines with the speaker's rhetorical question: "What need have you to dread / The monstrous crying of the wind?" (137). The implication is that, in dancing, Iseult expresses her "monstrous" female power, and this is confirmed where the speaker urges the child to "tumble out [her] hair" (136). This image of disarray recalls not only the reference to Athene's hair in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," but also Mary Bruin's image, in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, of dancing upon the dishevelled waves. Given that tumbling hair is an image of abandon, in the context of "To a Child," it can be construed as Yeats's wish that Iseult not grow up to be sexually restrained like her mother.³⁹

That the wind's cry is "monstrous," however, shows that, for Yeats, when a woman dances, she connects with her atavistic being, and because the child dances "by the shore," to the accompaniment of the "sea's scream," there is the further implication that Yeats's "dread" is of engulfment in the feminine.⁴⁰ This can be verified by reference to "A Prayer for My Daughter," the poem Yeats wrote in 1919, soon after the birth of his own daughter, Anne, and, significantly, only months after he had quarrelled with

³⁹ This is at least where Yeats was concerned. In his memoirs, he writes of an exchange he had with Gonne, some time after she had become Millevoe's mistress, when "with clenched hands," she had told him, "'I have a horror and terror of physical love'" (*Mem* 134).

⁴⁰ Later, where Yeats wrote of Margot Ruddock's breakdown in "A Crazy Girl," he reinforces the idea of the sea as reflecting chaos and feminine madness: "That crazy girl improvising her music, / Her poetry, dancing upon the shore, / Her soul in division from itself" (*CP* 348-9).

Gonne and refused her entry to her home.⁴¹ Here Yeats exposes his anguished thoughts about his daughter's future personality in the midst of violent nature: the poem opens with Yeats walking and praying for an hour in "great gloom" (211) to the accompaniment of "the sea-wind scream" and the "scream / In the elms above the flooded stream" (212). As in "To a Child," these personified images of frenzied wind and uncontained water have connotations of the Sidhe, of the dancing faeries, and of transgressive women, and here they characterise a future that, according to Yeats's system, has disintegrated into the chaotic, *Primary* Phase of history where the objective, individuated self is dissolved. Accordingly, the future is personified as a Dionysian dancer: Yeats imagines "in excited reverie / That the future years had come, / Dancing to a frenzied drum / Out of the murderous innocence of the sea" (212). (That this "feminine" future is antagonistic to masculine *Will* is also shown in *On Baile's Strand* where Cuchulain almost drowns, as well as in Yeats's 1929 prose version of the play, renamed *Fighting the Waves*, where the waves were actually represented by dancers.)⁴²

Yet, if having a baby daughter heightens Yeats's fear of engulfment by the feminine, equally, he fears she will become a woman who eschews her feminine essence, of whom Maud Gonne is the prime example:

⁴¹ After nursing wounded soldiers in France, Gonne had returned to England in 1917, only to be refused re-entry to Ireland under the Defence of the Realm Act. The following year, she was imprisoned in Holloway on charges of suspected espionage and later, after being removed to a sanatorium, she escaped and returned to her house in Dublin, where Yeats and his wife were living. Yeats's protectiveness of his wife who at the time was pregnant with Anne and ill with pneumonia, overrode any loyalty to Gonne, and he refused her shelter. It is interesting to speculate that, in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," where *She* deflates Robartes's hyperbole with her matter-of-fact reply, "You mean they argued" this is a reference not to the quarrel between a courtly lover and his lady's abstract thought, but more directly and prosaically, to Yeats's refusal to grant refuge to Gonne.

⁴² *Fighting the Waves* was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1929, with Ninette de Valois' students from the ballet school she ran in Dublin dancing as the waves that engulfed Cuchulain. For Yeats's introduction to "Fighting the Waves," see *Expl* 370-378.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
 So let her think opinions accursed.
 Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
 Out of the mouth of plenty's horn,
 Because of her opinionated mind
 Barter that horn and every good
 By quiet natures understood
 For an old bellows full of angry wind?

(213)

From the oblique reference to the *Sidhe*, it can be inferred that Yeats's newborn child must not dance. Unlike the opinionated and peripatetic *Gonne*, she should remain in a fixed place—implicitly, Yeats's home, and homeland—where she cultivates the gentle and melodious voice of *benign* nature:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
 That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
 And have no business but dispensing round
 Their magnanimities of sound,
 Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
 Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
 O may she live some green laurel
 Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

(213)

Clearly, having a daughter is deeply troubling for Yeats. In cultivating beauty and bodily thought, woman, at the same time, cultivates the “danger in the body”— the power that threatens man with his loss of identity. Significantly, the closing stanza of “A Prayer” is Yeats’s synthesis of this conflict; he sees his daughter delivered by a man in marriage. And here he presents the sacramental and transcendent union of woman with man as an analogy for the fusion of art and life, the resolution of conflict out of which the child (Anne) and art (the poem) are generated:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
 Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious;
 For arrogance and hatred are the wares
 Peddled in the thoroughfares.
 How but in custom and in ceremony
 Are innocence and beauty born?
 Ceremony’s a name for the rich horn,
 And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

(214)

It is important to note that in 1919, the year of his daughter’s birth, Yeats also wrote *At the Hawk’s Well*, the play to which Maud Gonne responded directly by identifying herself with the Hawk Woman. Indeed, Yeats almost certainly had Gonne in mind in his portrayal of the predatory bird-woman who withholds the well’s life-generating waters. Thus Richard Ellman’s view that she symbolises “logic and abstract thought” (Ellman 219) is justified, and it is intriguing that Helen Vendler disagrees with him because “abstract thought never is possessed, never cries out in a supernatural voice, -

never dances” (Vendler 211). Both critics, however, seem to miss the point that the Hawk Woman is a manifestation of the Herodias figure, and that accordingly she embodies the Yeatsian fantasy of unified being in which all antinomies are fused. Thus, as a symbol for art that is itself symbolic, she is no less a threatening figure because her very heterogeneity is the matrix out of which Yeats’s fantasy of unity or indivisible essence emerges, and she is the projected resolution of Yeats’s conflicting feelings about Gonne. If Gonne is the Hawk Woman who “castrates” with her abstract thought, she is also the Woman of the Sidhe who robs man of his normal life, as well as the virginally cold, iconic Herodias who withholds sexual fulfilment.⁴³

Yeats presents the latter view of Gonne in “The Cap and Bells,” an early poem that tells of a jester who is rejected by the moon-goddess queen whom he worships, and his subsequent act of symbolic self-castration. (The poem was written in 1893, soon after Gonne had rejected Yeats’s proposal of marriage.)⁴⁴ That the queen is literally elevated above her suitor, and enclosed in her own inviolate domain is established in the first stanza:

The jester walked in the garden:

The garden had fallen still;

He bade his soul rise upward

⁴³ According to Kline, Yeats’s infatuation with Maud Gonne can be divided into the three phases: the early years when Yeats immersed himself in the role of courtly lover, “Launcelot,” worshipping at the feet of his cruel lady; the period when he played “Sol” to her “Luna” in their “spiritual marriage”; and the last phase when, after his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees, he achieved detachment and retained her image purely as a poetic symbol. See Kline 1-18.

⁴⁴ In December 1892, Gonne had confessed to Yeats that she had dreamed they were married. Yeats seemed powerless to act on what was tantamount to a proposal and she left for Paris. Although, he later followed her to Paris and proposed to her with Lady Gregory’s encouragement, his offer was declined.

And stand on her window-sill.

(CP 71)

The queen's lunar aloofness, and her associated rejection of the jester's soul is apparent in the lines,

But the young queen would not listen

She rose in her pale night-gown;

She drew down the heavy casement

And pushed the latches down.

(72)

When the jester's "sweet-tongued," singing heart is also rejected, and he decides to send his "cap and bells," the castration metaphor is obvious:

'I have cap and bells,' he pondered,

'I will send them to her and die';

And when the morning whitened

He left them where she went by.

(CP 72)

Indeed, Harold Bloom acknowledges the jester and queen as Yeats and Maud Gonne (Bloom 128), and observes that the lines

She laid them upon her bosom,

Under a cloud of her hair,

And her red lips sang them a love-song

Till stars grew out of the air

(72)

refer to “that central Yeatsian image, out of the Decadence ... of the dancer with the severed head” (129).⁴⁵

Forty-one years later, the frigid queen/Gonne makes her reappearance in Yeats’s play *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, and a year after that, in its revised version *A Full Moon in March*, except that, in these plays, the “cap and bells” are replaced by the suitors’ heads. In the earlier play, the mute Queen breaks her silence with a song (albeit sung by the Second Attendant) in which the idea of sexual union with the Stroller is equated with death and corruption:

He longs to kill
My body, until
That sudden shudder
And limbs lie still.

O, what may come
Into my womb,
What caterpillar
My beauty consume?

(CPI 638)

As the Queen begins to dance before the Stroller’s head, the King’s goading words, “Dance, woman, dance! ... Dance, give him scorn for scorn, / Display your beauty, spread your peacock tail” (639), draw attention to her and, by implication, the work of

⁴⁵ Curtis Bradford also reads the poem as Gonne’s rejection of Yeats’s suit (YMG 458). It is interesting to note that Frank Kermode sees Yeats’s Salome figure as dissociated from what he terms “its pathological aspect” (RI 67) in Romantic and Decadent literature.

art's detached, unworldly beauty. According to Yeats's system, however, the Queen in her aloof, strange beauty belongs to Phase Fourteen. Accordingly, her dancing, initiated by her suitor's ritualistic decapitation (castration), transfigures her as the unified being of Phase Fifteen.

Likewise, in *A Full Moon in March*, the Queen's dance expresses Unity of Being, her fulfilment as pure beauty—the poetic image—where thought is embodied. Initially, the Second Attendant's words, "What can she lack whose emblem is the moon?" (630), reveal that in fact what the Queen lacks is the catalyst that provokes her to dance—to *become* a dancer—and that that catalyst is the decapitation of her polar opposite, the Swineherd whose physicality and earthliness are signified by his "scratched foul flesh" and his journey through "dust and mire" (981).⁴⁶ The Queen's dance—the climax of the play—symbolises (sexual) "union" with the Swineherd's head, the symbol for "masculine" intellect:

She takes the head up and dances with it to drum-taps, which grow quicker and quicker. As the drum taps approach their climax, she presses her lips to the lips of the head. Her body shivers to very rapid drum-taps. The drum-taps cease. She sinks slowly down, holding the head to her breast. (CPI 629).

This is clearly an image of orgasm; that it also implies insemination is indicated earlier in the play when the Swineherd remarks that "There is a story in my country of a woman / That stood all bathed in blood—a drop of blood / Entered her womb and there begat a child" (626). Such a union of the masculine and feminine, physical and metaphysical is

⁴⁶ As Kline points out, Yeats's notes to *A Full Moon in March* refer to "the mother goddess and the slain god," and thus show the influence of myths of Cybele and Artemis, whose rites took place around the twenty-fourth of March. During this period, frenzied male worshippers castrated themselves, and threw their genitals at the feet of the goddess's statue, and, as eunuch priests, they dressed in women's clothes.

also, in Nietzschean terms, a fusion of the Apollonian (sculptural art expressing the solar principle) and the Dionysian (emotional art expressing the lunar principle), and the drawing together of opposing *antithetical* and *primary* principles. For this the suitor sacrifices his life, and the Queen her virginity; the Queen's dance celebrates, and *is*, the union of life and art, and the creation, or (re)generation of both.

Both *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and *A Full Moon in March* reveal Yeats's fantasy of sexual union with Gonne as a metaphor, not only for the fusion of antinomies, but also for the generation of embodied and ritualised art, for which the poet must sacrifice himself.⁴⁷ The Stroller and the Swineherd bring the transcendent goddess down to earth carnally so that she may become the art object suffused with life—the union of spirit and matter. In *A Full Moon in March*, this is indicated in the words of the Queen, put into the mouth of the Second attendant, who asks,

Why must those holy, haughty feet descend
 From emblematic niches, and what hand
 Ran that delicate raddle through their white?
 My heart is broken, yet must understand.

What do they seek for? Why must we descend?

(CPI 629)

The First Attendant's reply, "For desecration and the lover's night" (629, 630), is repeated twice and closes the play: when the queen descends and dances, art is (sexually)

⁴⁷ In the earlier play, it is the king who orders the suitor's execution, whereas in *Full Moon* it is the queen.

created. In both plays, the Stroller's and the Swineherd's severed heads sing and become literally the mouthpieces for disembodied poetry.

As F.A.C. Wilson demonstrates in *W.B. Yeats and Tradition*, both *The King in the Great Clock Tower* and *A Full Moon in March* recapitulate Yeats's early fascination with both the Dionysus-Attis figure—here conflated with the image of John the Baptist as an Orphic archetype—and the mother goddess (68-72). In Yeats's own words, the severed-head symbolism in the earlier play (and by extension its later version) "is part of the old ritual of the year: the mother goddess and the slain god" (*VPI* 1010). In the sense that the archetypal *femme fatale* figure of Salome (the daughter) is subsumed in Herodias the mother (an analogy for Yeats's conflation of Maud Gonne and Iseult), the dancer represents quite another kind of unified being: Herodias/Gonne as both the muse and the matrix for (Yeats's) art.

Significantly, Yeats wrote of *A Full Moon in March* that it represented a "fragment of the past that I had to get rid of" (*Letters* 843). His last play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, likewise, seems to derive from Yeats's need for catharsis, especially if we accept that the angry words spoken in the Prologue by the old man are Yeats's own. Here he upholds a Nietzschean, Dionysian vision of life and art to the point that he entirely rejects the *logos*:

I promise a dance. I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil. Emer must dance, there must be severed heads—I am old, I belong to mythology—severed heads for her to dance before. (*CPI* 694)

Ecstatic dance is an escape from tyranny of self, and a complete submission to the feminine.

When seen in relation to Gautier's representation of the relationship between dancer and lover, Yeats's last three plays show that, on one level, his idea of unity of being is a redefinition of the Romantic yearning for (re)union with the Other. Like Gautier, Yeats uses sexual union as an analogy for resolving the flesh/spirit antinomies. It is useful to recall that where Gautier's ballet *La Péri* was concerned with the reciprocal yearnings of (female) transcendent spirit and (male) earthbound body, this concept is figured choreographically as an *embodied* metaphor when the ballerina/peri leaps from the clouds into the arms of her lover Achmet. (Arguably, by representing any dancer as symbol, Gautier incarnates his metaphor in a way that foreshadows Yeats.) For this reason, Gautier's remarks on *La Péri* deserve repeating here:

La matière ... aspire à l'idéal, à l'infini, à l'éternel. L'esprit, au contraire, dans sa mélancolie abstraite, désire la sensation, l'émotion, la douleur même; *il s'ennuie de n'avoir point de corps.* (*Ésd* 137, my emphasis)

These ideas are remarkably similar to those in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, where Yeats writes of the Daimon as seeking "not as like to like but ... its own opposite, for man and Daimon feed the hunger in one another's hearts" (*Myth* 335). Here, Yeats reveals the Platonic element that links his aesthetic with Gautier and Romanticism: there is an echo of Plato's myth of the lost half. And Yeats's lost half is Maud Gonne, his feminine ideal, and the projection of his feminine opposite, or *Mask*. In words that recall Gautier's admiration for Fanny Elssler's feminised "male" sculptural beauty, Yeats writes to Dorothy Wellesley, "Have you ever noticed that the Greek androgynous statue is always the woman in man, never the man in woman?" (*Letters* 875).

Just as Carlotta Grisi represents the unattainable ideal for Gautier, so Maud Gonne fulfils that role for Yeats. Yeats's multiple and conflicting impressions of Gonne are a projection of the conflict within himself, the very conflict out of which he makes poetry: the conflict between action and contemplation, body and soul, masculine and feminine. Moreover, the art/life union, expressed symbolically in the figure of the dancer, is the fulfilment of Yeats's wish for *his* union with Gonne. If thus Yeats also unifies the polarities that he sees in Gonne as both static goddess and restless, shape-changing predator, her threat as Woman of the Sidhe, Hawk Woman, and *objet d'art*, is displaced aesthetically to the "inhuman," or unattainable Phase Fifteen.

Chapter 5

The Dancer and the Dance: The Whirling of the Gyre

**‘The immortals are mortal, the mortals are immortal, each living in each others’ death and
dying in the others’ life.’ Heraclitus.**

**O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?**

Unlike Gautier and Symons, Yeats never worked as a theatre critic (Lady Gregory’s patronage spared him that fate), and he did not regularly frequent the café concert or the music hall; and although he refers to a number of dancers in his works, he does not seem to have drawn on personal experience of their performances.¹ Also unlike Gautier and Symons, Yeats almost entirely excludes the ballerina as an aesthetic symbol, and he certainly does not see her as erotic. If the Old Man’s venomous words in the prologue to *The Death of Cuchulain* are read as the writer’s own, Yeats despised ballet dancers:

I was at my wit’s end to find a good dancer; I could have got such a dancer
once, but she has gone; the tragi-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the

¹ This is not to say that Yeats never went to ballet performances. In a letter he wrote to Lady Gregory, dated 8 March 1913, he mentions that the previous evening he went with Charles Ricketts to a London performance of the *Ballets Russes* at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. It is clear from this letter that this was not his first visit to see the *Ballets Russes*; he writes: “This time I was well in front and could see the whole picture (do you remember our box high up at one side)” (qtd. in Ellis 202).

same neck love and loathing, life and death. I spit three times. I spit upon the dancers painted by Degas. I spit upon their short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes whereon they spin like peg-tops, above all upon that chambermaid face. They might have looked timeless, Rameses the Great, but not the chambermaid, that old maid history. I spit! I spit! I spit! (*CPI* 694)

If the “good dancer” is Ninette de Valois—the dancer for whom Yeats wrote *The King of the Great Clock Tower*—indeed, she had “gone”; by 1939 de Valois was entirely absorbed in her role as a choreographer and director of the Sadler’s Wells Theatre Ballet that she had co-founded eight years earlier.² The Old Man’s bitterness at losing his ideal dancer to a form of dance he despised, however, is focussed on the dancers painted by Degas, the *petits rats* of the Paris Opéra whom decades earlier Gautier had ridiculed, similarly, for their mechanical posturing, their lack of physical appeal, and their gratuitous flirting with the audience. Yeats’s reasons for disliking ballet dancers are, in part, remarkably like Gautier’s; the dancers he admires are not corseted, and they do not dance rigidly *en pointe*, but move freely, and with somatic wholeness. As I have shown, in a number of the plays, Yeats’s dancers either wear masks, or are made-up as if they are wearing masks, so there is no “chamber-maid” facial expression to detract from, or to compromise, the symbolic power of their movements. As Yeats puts it in his essay

² Although Ninette de Valois (1898-2001) was classically trained, she had performed with Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, where she had been exposed to the revolutionary changes to ballet initiated by the reforms of the choreographer Michel Fokine (1880-1942) and furthered by Vaslav Nijinsky (1888-1950). In addition, she seems to have been familiar with the abstract expressionist dance of Mary Wigman (1886-1973), and Rudolph von Laban (1879-1958) that emerged from Germany after WW1. In fact, de Valois describes her dancing in Yeats’s plays as “abstract expressionism,” and she improvised in each performance. In 1927, the year he met de Valois, Yeats encouraged her to set up a school of ballet at the Abbey Theatre, and in 1934, he invited Frederick Ashton (1904-1988), de Valois’ dancer-choreographer protégé, to take over the Abbey.

“Certain Noble Plays of Japan,” “A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stifling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body” (*E&I* 226).

Frank Kermode points out that Yeats shared with the later Romantics a preference for the unschooled dancer because “The language of the freely-moving dancer is more like the [poetic] Image than the virtuosity of the ballerina’s more limited range of movement”; accordingly, “her dance is more likely to have form, the ballerina’s only shape” (*RI* 68). (This is obviously not applicable to Symons because he sees an intrinsic eroticism in all dancers, including the ballerina, or to Gautier who does not exclude the ballerina as symbol, provided she complies with his construct of the erotic, Oriental Other.) For Yeats, however, the dancers who express “upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death” are those who move freely with their whole bodies, thereby “enabl[ing] us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind” (*E&I* 225). By Yeats’s definition, that excludes the ballet dancer.

That Yeats sees symbolic power in the free-moving body reminds us that he was profoundly influenced by Nietzsche’s ideas.³ Like Symons, Yeats found in Nietzsche the justification for seeing dance as an essentially Dionysian expression, and the agent for collapsing the boundaries between the self and other. Furthermore, Yeats found in Nietzsche a precedent for the notion of the embodied symbol. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes:

³ Yeats is also likely to have been influenced by Jane Harrison’s book *Ancient Art and Ritual*, published in 1913. Harrison, like Nietzsche, saw Greek religion and drama as having a common source. Drawing on Aristotle’s statement in the *Poetics* that tragedy originated from ritual dance of the Dithyramb, the festival of Dionysus, she saw art, religion and dance springing from the same unsatisfied desire to express what could not be expressed in practical action.

A new world of symbols was required, the whole of the symbolism of the body, not only the symbolism of the mouth, the eye, the word, but the rhythmic motion of all the limbs of the body in the complete gesture of the dance. Then all the other symbolic forces, the forces of music—rhythm, dynamics and harmony—would suddenly find impetuous expression. In order to grasp this total liberation of all symbolic forces, man must already have reached that peak of self-negation that seeks symbolic expression in those powers. (21)

Importantly, Yeats transposes Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian to a mystical Celtic past where paradoxically, dance is a medium for self-assertion through self-negation.

"The Celts," according to Yeats,

lived in a world where anything might flow and change, and become another thing.... They worshipped nature and the abundance of nature, and had always, as it seems, for a supreme ritual that tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed like gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon; and as some think, imagined for the first time in the world the blessed country of the gods and of the happy dead. They had imaginative passions because they ... were nearer to ancient chaos, every man's desire, and had immortal models about them. (*E&I* 178)

To dance in the Irish landscape, then, is to be authentically Celtic and become the paradoxical godlike beast, the being who, like the Woman of the Sidhe, or the Hawk Woman/Herodias, incarnates the spiritual, or spiritualises the carnal. By implication,

transfiguration through ritual Celtic dance is a metaphor for the Irish artist's union with his art: through the dissolution of self he achieves self-definition as poet/god—in Nietzschean terms, the *Übermensch*—who is embodied, yet transcendent and symbiotic with the mythical Irish landscape. Just as Gautier sees erotic dance as *jouissance*, so Yeats represents free dance in terms that similarly foreshadow the Kristevan concept of the yearning to return to the pre-verbal state of the maternal Other, in Yeats's case, the land of his birth.

For Yeats, the quasi-divine, shape-changing Herodias figure is a symbol for art whose matrix is within both the mystical Irish landscape and the unconscious from which all things “flow and change and become another thing” (*E&I* 78). This is consistent with his Jungian notion of the *anima mundi*, and in what amounts to his articles of faith, in his essay “Magic,” Yeats declares:

I believe in three doctrines which have been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:—

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

(*E&I* 28)

That the mind has indeterminate borders is clearly related to Yeats's idea that consciousness constantly moves through the various lunar phases in this life, and also as a series of reincarnations in the after-life. Radically opposed to the Judeo-Christian idea of history and human existence as essentially linear and teleological, these ideas reflect Nietzsche's Heraclitean view of existence that Yeats adopted, and which he visualised as a system of rotating double gyres. In fact, to describe the effect of the counter-pull of opposing forces that influence consciousness, Yeats quotes directly from Heraclitus; as he puts it in *A Vision*: "every month or phase ... is a double vortex moving from Phase 1 to Phase 28, or two periods, one solar and one lunar, which in the words of Heraclitus 'live each other's death, die each other's life'" (197). Similarly, in his *Memoirs* Yeats writes, "the immortals are mortal, the mortals are immortal, each living in each others' death and dying in the others' life" (216). Accordingly, the dancer who symbolises the unity of being belongs to that inhuman fifteenth, or mid-point, phase when matter and spirit, the mortal and the immortal are coequal. (Significantly, the queen in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* dances at midnight, on the cusp of night and morning.) In other words, the dancer, inseparable from the dance, symbolises the moment when time is suspended, the dynamic body is equally static artefact, and art and life interpenetrate.

In a number of his works, both poetry and prose, Yeats represents dance as a purification rite, a ritual whereby mortal flesh is transmuted into eternal spirit (in a sense, a reversal of the Christian incarnation), or immortal, spiritualised (embodied) art. Prime examples are his early story *Rosa Alchemica*, and the much later Byzantium poems. Accordingly, Yeats's dancers bear little relation to either the worldly *petits rats* painted by Degas, or the pert ballerinas who graced the music-hall stage, not only because they

move freely with their whole bodies, but also because their dance is ritualistic. And unlike the ballerina whose trajectory is predominantly vertical and linear, and who, framed by the proscenium arch, often interrupts the flow of movement in order self-consciously to pose, the Yeatsian dancer moves in spiralling and circular patterns, seemingly in infinite space, and *in perpetuum*.⁴ Thus she appears as the vehicle of her own transformation, or self-generation, even though she exists in a universe which, according to Yeats's Nietzschean view, is essentially deterministic (and by extension, tragic).⁵

In *The Whole Mystery of Art*, Giorgio Melchiori writes,

The idea of cycles of civilization on the one hand, and the symbolic meaning of the circular motion characteristic of ritual dances in different cultures, on the other, may have more or less consciously contributed to enhance for [Yeats] the suggestiveness of spiral movement. (259)

This claim can be argued more forcefully: Yeats consciously drew on images of circular (and ritualised) dance not only because dance was promoted as an essential aspect of the Celtic revival, but also because, throughout his lifetime, images of "free," "primitive," and Oriental dance were prevalent in both "high" and "low" art. The most obvious evidence for Yeats's symbolic use of popular, non-balletic dance occurs in the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," where he uses the image of Loie Fuller manipulating

⁴ Although the classical ballet vocabulary includes turning steps such as *pirouettes* and *chainés*, *adagio promenades* and *grand allegro* steps, as well as steps that are performed *en manège* (in a circle), the emphasis is on symmetry, and the upward lift of the body.

⁵ For Nietzsche, dance is a symbol of the *Übermensch*, and the divine. In "The First Dance Song" of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a work that Yeats knew well, Zarathustra comes across a group of girls dancing, and when they stop at his approach, he states "I am God's advocate with the Devil; he, however, is the Spirit of Gravity. How could I be enemy to divine dancing ... ?" (131). In "The Second Dance Song," Nietzsche's hero refers to his own "dancing-mad feet" (241).

her swathe of silk as a metaphor for the movement of the gyres.⁶ Fuller was not a trained dancer, yet it was as a dancer that she held widespread popular appeal and acquired the status of aesthetic icon for *art nouveau* artists in general, and Stéphane Mallarmé in particular.⁷

Moreover, Yeats's perception that Michio Ito—his original Hawk Woman—possessed a “genius of movement” (*E&I* 236) reflects how he is caught up in the prevailing fascination, throughout the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, with dance that was not only “free,” but also Oriental.⁸ In fact, Ito was only one of a number of dancers and performers who contributed to the spread of *Japonisme* in particular, and Orientalism in general. In the summer of 1900, London saw the first performances of the Japanese Court Company, a kabuki troupe who featured the soon-to-

⁶ Yeats was discerning in his preference for non-balletic dancing, however, and he held little regard for the popular skirt dancing that pre-dated Fuller's more sophisticated manipulation of fabric. In 1893, where he writes condemning contemporary society's superficial values, he includes skirt dancing:

We can no more get up a great interest in the Gods of Olympus. ... And for the lack of those great typical personages who flung thunderbolts or had serpents in their hair, we have betaken ourselves in a hurry to the poetry of cigarettes and black coffee, of absinthe, and the skirt dance. (*UP* 284-5)

⁷ Loie Fuller (1862-1928) made her European debut in Paris at the Folies Bergère in 1892, (she made her London debut the following year), and performed throughout Europe and the United States. Although she formed her own company, creating works involving a number of dancers, she is remembered mainly as an individual performer. She was an exponent of “free” movement with a unique approach: draped in muslin or silk which obscured her body, and using music only as a background, Fuller manipulated with sticks great swathes of fabric in curvilinear, spiralling patterns, thereby representing various things such as flowers, butterflies, moths, birds, fire and clouds. The *trompe l'oeil* effect was enhanced by strategically placed mirrors and her innovative use of lighting. Among her dances were *Butterfly* (1892), *Clouds* (1893), *Lily* and *Fire* (1893). The impressionistic, non-linear effects that Fuller achieved in her performances, and which gave rise to her status as a cult figure, are recreated in the large number of art works in which she is featured, including the posters by Toulouse-Lautrec, Jules Chéret and Jean de Paléologue, and the many and varied representations of her form in ceramics and jewellery. See Fuller's autobiography, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (London, Herbert Jenkins 1913). See also Richard Nelson Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1997); and Guy Ducrey, *Corps et graphies: Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1996) 481-515.

⁸ Ito was trained in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, a system founded by Émile Jacques-Dalcroze whereby students translate sound into movement. A number of dancers and future choreographers, including Mary Wigman (1886-1973), the founder of German expressionist dance, trained with Dalcroze.

become star, the geisha-trained Sada Yacco.⁹ It is likely that, in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” where Yeats refers to Loïe Fuller’s “Chinese” dancers, he actually had this Japanese troupe in mind.¹⁰

That Yeats was aware of the popular dancers of his day is indicated in the poem “His Phoenix,” written in 1915 as a tribute to Maud Gonne. Here he names a number of other beautiful women, two of whom are dancers; in the second stanza he writes, “And Ruth St. Denis had more charm although she had poor luck; / From nineteen hundred nine or ten, Pavlova’s had the cry” (CP 171). Ruth St. Denis was an American dancer who, like Duncan and Fuller, specialised in “Oriental” dance; her repertoire included a “Hindu” ballet, *Radha*, and a work named *Cobra*, both of which she danced, however incongruously, to music by Delibes.¹¹ Anna Pavlova was one of the ballerinas who appeared in the inaugural season of Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in Paris, 1909 (the year mentioned in “His Phoenix”) and who, by 1915 was already legendary for her solo *Le Cygne*, more commonly known as *The Dying Swan*. It seems likely, then, that Yeats’s mention of Pavlova’s “cry,” with its connotations of the swansong is informed by at least

⁹ Sada Yacco also performed in the Japanese pavilion at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, making a profound impression on a number of French writers and artists. Interestingly, Sada Yacco was the first woman to break down the all-male tradition of Japanese theatre, and as Shelley C. Berg points out, she consciously adulterated her performances to accord with Western concepts of the Oriental; thus Sada Yacco increasingly focussed on, and over-played, the violent aspects of Japanese drama. See Berg 343-404.

¹⁰ The Exhibition Universelle in Paris 1900 had numerous pavilions where oriental women were on display. See Rhonda Garelick, “Electric Salome: Loie Fuller at the Exposition Universelle in 1900,” *Theater and Imperialism: Essays on World Theater, Drama and Performance*, Ed. J. Ellen Gainor (New York: Routledge, 1995) 85-100. For a survey of the various Oriental and “free” dancers and dance performances of the period, see Ellis’s chapter “The Dancer in Performance” 154-246.

¹¹ In 1915, with her husband Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis formed Denishawn, the dance school that taught primitive or “free” movement as well as Oriental and German expressionist dance, and provided a base for the development of modern dance. See Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).



Fig.11. Maud Allan as Salome.



Fig.12. Anna Pavlova in *The Dying Swan*.



Fig.13. Ruth St. Denis in a Burmese Solo Dance.

a passing knowledge of this solo dance.¹² It is also interesting to note that the original manuscript for “His Phoenix” shows Yeats’s initial intention to name two other performers (and perhaps that he confused the dancers’ identities); it reads:

Pavlova is beyond our praise, Gaby’s a laughing eye
 Though Ruth St. Denis had no luck she had an Indian charm
 In 1908 or nine Miss Maud Allan had the cry.

(CCP 185)

“Gaby” is the French actress Gaby Delys (1884-1920) whom Yeats seems to remember as a dancer, and Maud Allan was famous (and infamous) for her rendition of Salome’s dance in *The Vision of Salome*.¹³

From his reference to Pavlova, it seems likely that Yeats was aware of the ballerina’s early association with the *Ballets Russes*; we know that on at least two occasions he attended a London performance, one sometime in 1911, another, with Charles Ricketts, on March 7, 1913. From their inaugural season in Paris in 1909

¹² One of ballets in which Anna Pavlova danced with the *Ballets Russes*, in their inaugural season in Paris, 1909, was Fokine’s *Le Pavillon d’Armide*, based on Gautier’s short story “Omphale.” At first glance, it seems inconsistent with Yeats’s aesthetic that he should name a ballerina alongside Ruth St. Denis, but Pavlova was famed for her expressiveness, evident in *The Dying Swan*, a solo dance whose use of bird symbolism would have appealed to him. In his notes to “The Tower,” Yeats quotes T. Sturge Moore’s poem “The Dying Swan” with the following preamble: “In the passage about the Swan in Part III I have unconsciously echoed one of the loveliest lyrics of our time—Mr. Sturge Moore’s ‘Dying Swan.’ I often recited it during an American lecturing tour, which explains the theft” (CP 533). Pavlova was also praised for her impersonation of a bluebird in the famous *pas de deux* from *Sleeping Beauty* that she performed with Nijinsky in London in November, 1911. On November 4, 1911, *The Times* critic writes:

Here, the pointed toe step, which Mme. Pavlova does with an entrancing grace which no one else can quite attain, is used in a new way, with little clawing movements as though only a small thread held her to the ground and she were trying to free herself and sail away in mid-air. (qtd. in Ellis 205).

¹³ In a radio broadcast he gave in London, April 10, 1932, Yeats introduced his reading of “His Phoenix” with the comment that “in the second stanza are the names of dancers famous in Europe before the war, the French dancer Gaby Delys, the Russian Pavlova, the American Ruth St Denis” (qtd. in Toomey 390).

For an account of Allan’s career and her version of Salome’s dance see Felix Cherniavsky, *Maud Allan and Her Art* (Toronto: Toronto Dance Collection, Danses Press/es, 1998). See also Allan’s autobiography *My Life in Dancing* (London: Everett, 1908).

onwards (their first London season was in 1910), the *Ballets Russes* presented works remarkable for their “natural” movements, their national dance steps, and their Orientalist (and often erotic) themes.¹⁴ Some of the earliest of these works were created by Mikhail Fokine, the choreographer whose commitment to reforming ballet of its superficiality was in part influenced by the dancing of Isadora Duncan.¹⁵ (When Yeats’s father saw Duncan perform in New York in 1908, he wrote of her in terms similar to those his son uses to depict Herodias. According to J.B. Yeats, Duncan danced “all alone on this immense stage—and there ... you felt the charm of the self-contained woman” [qtd. in Steegmuller 175]). In fact, the 1913 performance that Yeats saw with Ricketts included a Fokine ballet, *Le Bleu Dieu*, a work inspired by Hindu art in which the

¹⁴ The influence of the *Ballets Russes* on the high art and popular culture of the early twentieth century is a fascinating subject. Of relevance here is the focus in the early years on “Oriental” works. *Schéhérazade* (1909), for example, was remarkable for its lush designs by Bakst. Other examples of “Oriental” works are *Cléopâtre* (1909), *L’Oiseau de feu* (1910), *Les Orientales* (1910), *Thamar* (1912) and *Salomé* (1913).

¹⁵ Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) was the dancer who helped give birth to “modern,” or “contemporary” dance. She was powerfully influenced by Greek sculpture, and rejected the formality and strictures of ballet in favour of improvisational dance that she performed barefoot and in light, floating tunics. Writing of an early performance Duncan gave in London on 17 March 1900, a reviewer in *The Times* records that the dancer illustrated passages from “the Homeric *Hymns to Demeter* and the idylls of Theocritus” which, in turn, were read “with much effect by Miss Jane Harrison” (qtd. in Ellis 188). Of particular interest is Duncan’s troubled relationship with Edward Gordon Craig: what it reveals is that Craig’s theories on drama, and the importance of the mask—theories that held strong appeal for Yeats—were underpinned by a virulent misogyny. See Duncan’s autobiography *My Life* (London: Sphere Books, 1988). See also Victor Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (New York: The Dial Press, 1971), and Francis Steegmuller, *Your Isadora: The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

Fokine had attended Isadora Duncan’s first performance in Russia, at the Hall of Nobles, St. Petersburg, 26 December 1904. In his reforms that he set out in a letter to *The Times*, 6 July 1914, he included his five principles of the “new ballet” where he writes in reference to Isadora Duncan that “the body of the dancer was liberated not only from stays and satin slippers, but also the dance-steps of the ballet.” Fokine notes that she “founded her dancing on ... the most natural of all dance-forms—namely, the dancing of the ancient Greeks” (qtd. in *The Dancing Times*, June 1932, 223). These ideas parallel Yeats’s notion of “free” dance, and seem to foreshadow the Old Man’s words in *The Death of Cuchulain*. In the fourth of his five principles, Fokine also states: “The new ballet ... in developing the principle of expressiveness advances from the expressiveness of the face to the expressiveness of the whole body” (225).

legendary Vaslav Nijinsky, his body painted in blue and silver, danced the role of Krishna.

That *Le Bleu Dieu* appealed to Yeats's taste for non-balletic, symbolic, and ritualistic dance is evident in his letter to Lady Gregory where he writes, "I thought it most exquisite, most simple and strangely profound. The one beautiful thing I have seen on the stage of recent years" (qtd in Ellis 202).¹⁶ In the previous week, the *Ballets Russes* had presented Nijinsky's symbolist-impressionistic work, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Based on Mallarmé's poem of the same name, and set to Debussy's music, this short work was inspired by the Greek reliefs, and the depiction of dancers on Greek vases that Nijinsky was reputed to have studied in the Louvre.¹⁷ According to reports (and surviving photographs), the nymphs and the faun danced in profile, with parallel feet, and with jerky, puppet-like movements. There is no record of Yeats having seen *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, but, considering that Charles Ricketts was a devotee of Nijinsky's dancing and is almost certain to have seen the work, it seems very likely that he would have discussed it with Yeats. This is especially so given that, in its subject matter, its literary heritage and its unorthodox choreography, *L'Après-midi*, in effect, staged a symbolist aesthetic that paralleled Yeats's.¹⁸ Cyril W. Beaumont observes that Nijinsky

¹⁶ For an account of this work, see Cyril W. Beaumont *The Diaghilev Ballet in London*, 3rd ed., (London: A. and C. Black, 1951) 57-60. Among the works presented during the 1911 London season were Fokine's *Schéhérazaïde* and "The Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*. Interestingly, in addition to *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, another of Fokine's ballets was based on, and named after Gautier's poem, *Le Spectre de la Rose*.

¹⁷ Lynn Garafola points out that, in fact, it was most likely Léon Bakst and Sergei Diaghilev who conceived of the idea of frieze-like "Greek" movement for *L'Après-midi*. She also draws attention to the likely influence of Meyerhold's drama innovations—his "static theatre"—that included a dehumanised acting style and poses held in profile. See Garafola, chapter 2, "The Vanguard Poetic of Vaslav Nijinsky," *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 51-55.

¹⁸ Ellis notes, however, that Ricketts makes no mention of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, which is strange indeed. It is interesting to note that London saw a bowdlerised version of the work. The previous year,

danced the part of the Faun with an absence of emotion, his features “set and expressionless, and did not change throughout the ballet” (*DBL* 54), and that he and the nymphs “moved backwards and forwards ... very like an animated frieze” (51). In his writing on drama, Yeats says that actors should “move, for the most part, slowly, quietly, and not very much, and there should be something in their movements decorative and rhythmical as if they were paintings on a frieze” (*E&I* 176-7).

In that same 1913 London season, the *Ballets Russes* staged Fokine’s *Petrouchka*, followed later in the year by the revolutionary primitivist work, Nijinsky’s ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps*. These two works are of particular interest here because set to Stravinsky’s music, their choreography demonstrated an aesthetic that likewise paralleled Yeats’s own: traditional dance was used in artistic form to express the mysticism and ritualism associated with national myth. Although its roots are in the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, *Petrouchka* tells the story of the archetypal suffering clown in the setting of a nineteenth-century Butterweek Fair in St. Petersburg, and its choreography includes traditional Russian dance steps, performed appropriately by “authentic” Russian characters such as coachmen, nursemaids, and street performers. Thus *Petrouchka*’s ultimate triumphant release from his oppressors in death—open to a number of interpretations, including that of the poet freed from a philistine world—is relocated in Russian folk lore.¹⁹ *Le Sacre du Printemps* drew on even earlier Russian custom, the

L’Après-midi had scandalised Parisian audiences with its conclusion; when the Faun/Nijinsky withdrew to his elevated rock, and lowered himself onto the scarf dropped by one of the nymphs, he simulated orgasm. For London reviews of *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*, see Ellis 210-11.

¹⁹ Alexandre Benois, who designed the scenery and costumes for *Petrouchka*, gives an interesting account of its genesis. See Alexandre Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, trans. Mary Britnieva (London: Putnam, 1947) 323-338.

pagan celebration of spring that climaxes in the sacrifice of a virgin.²⁰ Set to Stravinsky's revolutionary score inspired by traditional Russian ceremonial songs associated with sun and moon worship, and by Lithuanian folk tunes, Nijinsky's choreography required the dancers to abandon their classical training and to use turned-in, and pounding footwork, and to move in large groups tracing multiple circles reminiscent of the traditional round dance, the *khoro vod*.²¹ If *Le Sacre* shocked audiences, it would certainly have fulfilled Yeats's view of "free" dance as the mystical, ritualistic expression of national identity, and as essentially anti-bourgeois.

Parallel to the reform of ballet in England as part of the Celtic revival, was the rediscovery, by individuals such as Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) and Maud Karpeles (1885-1976) of British and Celtic folk dance.²² An important characteristic of many of these dances—as with their European and Russian equivalents—is their non-linear figures and patterns that can be traced to the earliest of dance forms that, in turn, are considered to be steeped in ancient ritual. Where English and Celtic dances have their roots in European, Greek and Slavic myth and pagan worship, they are usually circular or serpentine in their

²⁰ The authenticity of *Le Sacre du Printemps* as folk lore is questionable since there is no record of female sacrifice having been an aspect of ancient Russian fertility ritual.

²¹ In fact, the classically trained dancers found it almost impossible to dance to the rhythms of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, and it fell to Marie Rambert, who had been trained in Eurhythmics to rehearse them, counting the beats so they could keep in time. I can find no mention of *Le Sacre* by Yeats, but he can scarcely have been unaware of its impact. There were two versions of the work; the first, by Nijinsky, was never performed in London; the second, by Leonide Massine, premiered in Paris December 15, 1920—where it was a success—was brought to London a few months later, but was withdrawn from the repertoire after only two performances. For a comprehensive discussion of the work, see Shelley C. Berg, *Le Sacre du Printemps: Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham*. Ann Arbor/London: UMI. Research, 1988.

²² Cecil Sharp published *The Country Dance Book* in 1909, followed by Part 2 in 1911, and Parts 3 and 4 in 1912 and 1916, and during the next ten years he published Parts 5 and 6. He founded the English Folk Dance Society in 1911. Also see Douglas Kennedy, *England's Dances* (London: Bell and Sons, 1949).

patterning (maypole dancing, for example) and are often repeated indefinitely to the point of the dancers' exhaustion. Furthermore, the dancers link hands or arms, thereby, it is thought, enacting the ritual enclosure of an object of worship, both containing and generating magic. Although such ritualistic dances have been modified by Teutonic and Viking influences, their source is thought to be in Druidical sun- and oak-worship. Accordingly, one of the earliest and simplest of circle dances known both as "At the Beginning of the World" and "Selling's Round" reflects the Celtic Druids' midsummer celebrations in which the participants placed themselves around a central altar and within a circle of stones.²³ Similarly, some European dances circle the sacred tree, or the bonfire, and in others, the dancers' circular motion is thought to be a mode of moon- or sun-worship, performed respectively by women and men.²⁴ The Ukrainian dance "Moonshine" is one such example.

Serpentine, or chain dances, of which there are numerous versions throughout Europe (the Helston Furry Dance is the English version) are notable for the way they are performed interminably as they meander throughout the dancers' village and the surrounding countryside. It is interesting to note that the Farandole—the Provençale version of the chain dance—has been traced to fertility ritual and to Greek myth: linked by handkerchiefs that suggest silken thread, the dancers move in a serpentine chain that

²³ For a survey of Celtic dance, including specifically Irish dance, see Joan Lawson, *European Folk Dance: Its National and Musical Characteristics* (London: Pitman, 1955) 143-190. See also Susan Cooper, "The Sacred Circle," *Dance Gazette* (June 1986): 43.

²⁴ Yeats is likely to have been familiar with the description in *The Iliad* of a round dance depicted on the shield forged by Hephaistos. Homer mentions a "dancing floor" on which the dancers were "holding hands at the wrist" (Lattimore 391). Interestingly, when Thetis comes to collect the shield, she is described as "like a hawk sweeping down from the snows of Olympus" (*sic*, 391)—a possible precedent for Yeats's Hawk Woman.

re-enacts Theseus's journey through the Labyrinth.²⁵ Unbroken patterning also forms the shape of Celtic and English dances. The Highland dances of Scotland, English Morris and Sword dances, as well as English country dances are all noted for the patterns traced on the ground by the dancers, and many are danced in sets or pre-arranged groupings. The Scottish Sword Dance, for example, requires the dancer to weave in, out, and around, the crossed swords; and the various reels and strathspeys of Scottish Highland dancing are performed in sets, and in patterns such as the figure-of-eight. Similarly, in the Winsters Morris Reel the sixteen dancers perform the *Hey* whose floor pattern shows a design of two pairs of parallel figures-of-eight enclosed within an oval. Even more complicated is the Irish Jig where the steps trace the interwoven, spiralling Celtic design of the Tara brooch. As Joan Lawson suggests, it was from these designs as traced by the dancers' movements that the designs on Celtic monuments may have developed (Lawson 143).

It seems highly likely that Yeats's wide knowledge of Celtic myth and design, intrinsic aspects of Western Ireland and its landscape, both physical, and metaphysical, was matched by his familiarity with Irish dance. Indeed, circular movement, and ritual dance are the very wellspring of Yeats's aesthetic. It is also significant that he had a profound interest in painting and sculpture, including Greek and Renaissance art, and the work of Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites. Thus he would have been familiar—in some instances at first-hand—with many visual and static representations of circular movement

²⁵ For a comprehensive coverage of European folk dance, including its steps, history and development, and its relationship to myth and ritual, see Lawson. See also Helen Wingrave and Robert Harrold, *Aspects of Folk Dance in Europe* (London: Dance Books, 1984), and Curt Sachs, *The World History of Dance* (London: Allen and Unwin 1938).

and dance.²⁶ From 1895 to 1917, Yeats lived in Woburn Buildings, a short distance from the British Museum where he could study the collection of Greek sculpture, including the works of Phidias, and the collection of Greek vases. Some of these vases are decorated with scenes which are amongst the earliest visual representations of dance. The Townley Vase which inspired Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (that in turn influenced Yeats) is in this collection.²⁷ In a literal sense, by virtue of the medium, these dancers seem to move in perpetual, circular fashion.²⁸

An example of a visual representation of circle dance with which Yeats was likely to have had first-hand knowledge is Botticelli's *The Mystic Activity* in the National Gallery. Although he does not write of this painting, *The Mystic Activity* may well have influenced his ideas of dance because it depicts a linked circle of angels dancing above the stable where shepherds worship the Christ child. And Yeats almost certainly would have recognised in Edward Burne-Jones's *The Golden Stairs* a connection between spiralling motion and collective dance. In this painting, a number of women in diaphanous, flowing gowns descend a winding staircase; their interlocked bodies, and the

²⁶ See Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP) 120. Yeats also made a number of tours to Europe where he saw the works already familiar to him through his substantial collection of books on art.

²⁷ The closing lines of the first stanza of Keats's "Ode" in particular imply Dionysian dance: "What men or gods are these? What maidens loath? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy," and the line "ever panting and for ever young" (*RA* 1060-61) seems to foreshadow Yeats's images of eternally youthful dancing faeries, and "The young / In one another's arms" (*CP* 217).

²⁸ For details on the "Komast" dancers on Corinthian vases, see John Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974) 209-210. Of interest is an early twentieth-century technical manual on Greek dance based on the movements illustrated on vases. See Maurice Emmanuel, *The Antique Greek Dance After Sculptured and Painted Figures*, trans. Harriet Jean Beauley (New York: John Lane, 1916).

placing of their feet, each with one on the step above, the other on the step below, all evoke the continuous movement of serpentine dance.

Paradoxically, Yeats considered Edward Burne-Jones's paintings to be too calm and ethereal, a bias he did not have against Pre-Raphaelite art in general. It is not surprising, then, that Yeats not only shared the Pre-Raphaelites' admiration for the visual art of William Blake, but that he was also influenced by their ideas (he was particularly moved by William Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, "*Pictor Ignotus*," as rewritten by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and his brother William Michael Rossetti). When his essay "William Blake and His Illustrations to the *Divine Comedy*" was published in *The Savoy*, July 1896, Yeats chose to accompany it with a Blake illustration that he owned: "Paolo and Francesca (Whirlwind of Lovers)" from *Illustrations to Dante's "Divine Comedy,"* 1827. What is immediately obvious in this illustration is the clockwise spiral of figures to the left of the picture: they are drawn together and upwards by a centripetal force over which they have no control. So powerful is this image that only some moments later do we notice the earthbound figures to the right of the picture, or the depiction of the lovers who are similarly, but less forcefully drawn heavenwards. In Blake's *Jacob's Ladder*, the effect of circular movement is powerfully achieved by the central stairway that spirals upwards, seemingly to infinity, and upon which are poised a number of figures. With the curved line of their bodies, their extended arms, and their airborne feet, the figures actually seem to dance and there is a powerful sense of the gyre or spiral movement within spiral movement. In fact, *Jacob's Ladder* was the model for T. Sturge Moore's design that graced the cover of Yeats's volume *The Winding Stair*. In a letter to Sturge Moore, Yeats wrote:

The Winding Stair, as you will see by one of the poems, is the winding stone stair of Ballylee enlarged in a symbol, but you may not think the stair, even when a mere symbol, pictorial. It may be a mere gyre—Blake’s design of Jacob’s ladder—with figures, little figures. (qtd. in Melchiori 266)

As visual representations of circular motion, Blake’s “Jacob’s Ladder” and “Paolo and Francesca (Whirlwind of Lovers)” can be linked with Yeats’s adoption of the gyre as a symbol for his system. In the case of “Paolo and Francesca (Whirlwind of Lovers),” moreover, there is a semantic link between the gyre, the dancer, and the Dionysian impulse: the word “Whirlwind” in the title must have either consciously or unconsciously reminded Yeats of the Sidhe.²⁹

The spiralling movement of the wind—the dance of the Sidhe—is a feature in a number of Yeats’s poems, not only as imagery, but also as the basis for their structure; form and content are synthesised in what can be described as self-generating verse that seems to be the dance itself. For example, in its structure and mood, the faeries’ dance in *The Wandering of Oisín* is highly suggestive of the Farandole. The dancers move through the landscape in the manner of a chain dance whose serpentine motion is highlighted by its alliterative link with the surroundings: “The dance wound through the windless woods; / The ever-summered solitude,” and the faeries “danced to where in the winding thicket / The damask roses, bloom on bloom / Like crimson meteors hang in the gloom” (CP 419). Moreover, the dancers’ indifference to the passage of time stresses the dance’s duration, as does the structure of the poem: the dance is sustained for two stanzas, and

²⁹ Loizeaux points out that a number of critics have also noted the connection between the vortex as a metaphor for creativity and Yeats’s gyre. Jeffares, Ellman and Melchiori have all argued that, in addition to being drawn from a wide range of literary sources, Yeats’s ideas of spiral motion developed from his discussions on Vorticism with Ezra Pound.

continued into a third, lasting for a total of thirty-seven lines. Further, the dance's continuity is suggested by its commencement with a conjunction and by the use of *enjambement* (in dance terms, the continuity of steps that is called the *enchainement*):

And in a wild and sudden dance
 We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance
 And swept out of the wattled hall
 And came to where the dewdrops fall
 Among the foamdrops of the sea,
 And there we hushed the revelry.

(CP 418)

Only after “revelry” is there a semi-colon, a pause that seems to allow the dancers to draw breath before continuing: “And, gathering on our brows a frown, / Bent all our swaying bodies down” (418). The near-hypnotic effect of bodies swaying is an aspect of ritual movement in which the self dissolves and is absorbed into the group—Yeats's *Primary* phase. Indeed, the dance is a collective experience—“We danced to where in the winding thicket / The damask roses, bloom on bloom”—and the dancers continue their serpentine way to the moment of ecstasy:

The dance wound through the windless woods;
 The ever-summered solitudes;
 Until tossing arms grew still
 Upon the woody central hill;
 And, gathered in a panting band,
 We flung on high each waving hand

And sang unto the starry broods.

(CP 419)

In another early, shorter poem, “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” as Terri Mester notes, the word *dance* never appears; but there is what she describes as a “verbal dance” (Mester 50) of frenzied, trance-like rhythm and energy that she rightly attributes to Yeats’s use of participles. The word “Hosting” in the title is paralleled with “tossing,” “heaving,” “waving,” and “rushing,” (CP 61) all evoking continuous movement. Furthermore, the “riding” of the host, the “tossing” of Caoilte’s “burning” hair, and Niamh’s “calling” (61) occur in the four opening and closing lines of the poem, as if to encircle and emphasise the central, italicised lines. And in the way that this enclosed verse reflexively expresses the seductive and all-encompassing power of the Sidhe, it seems to move as in a vortex. Niamh opens this, her siren song, with the invocation “*Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream*” that returns to become a threat, “*And if any gaze on our rushing band, / We come between him and the deed of his hand. / We come between him and the hope of his heart*”; and between these lines is the seductive dance of the Sidhe:

The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart.

(61)

By the force of their self-generating power, the Sidhe are swept together in a “*rushing band*” as if in a Blakean whirlwind.

A number of Yeats's poems that feature dance imagery—especially those written in his early and late years—are actually structured as Celtic dances of the kind that comprise a series of steps to set measures, each of which concludes with a repeated “break.” For example, “The Madness of King Goll” has six stanzas that all end in the italicised refrain “*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter around me, the beech leaves old*” (CP 17-20, Yeats's italics). The repetition of this closing line, and its allusion to an encircling wind, enhances the sense that the poem is a jig or reel with individual steps (stanzas) that are essentially circular in form because they constantly return to the same point. Yeats also uses this device to great effect in “The Stolen Child.” This supremely lyrical early poem celebrates the seductive, sensual beauty of the Irish landscape where the Sidhe “foot it all the night, / Weaving olden dances, / Mingling hands and mingling glances” (CP 20). Like an “olden” dance, it has a predominantly regular rhythm and rhyme scheme, and its four stanzas close with a “break”:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand.

(CP 20)

In his late poem “Sweet Dancer” (1937), written about Margot Ruddock, Yeats similarly unites content with form. Reminiscent of “To a Child Dancing in the Wind,” this poem redefines Yeats's earlier images of the beautiful female dancer; but rather than riding the wind with the Sidhe, she is located in a contained and manicured garden. Nonetheless,

because her dance is an expression of madness, the girl escapes the pain of self-awareness. And because both stanzas close with an italicised refrain, thereby recapturing the dance-like, circular structure of his earlier lyrical poems, Yeats seems nostalgically to resituate her in his own eternally youthful, mythical Celtic world free from bourgeois restraint:

The girl goes dancing there
 On the leaf-sown, new mown, smooth
 Grass plot of the garden;
 Escaped from bitter youth,
 Escaped out of her crowd,
 Or out of her black cloud.
Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!

If strange men come from the house
 To lead her away, do not say
 That she is happy being crazy;
 Lead them gently astray;
 Let her finish her dance,
 Let her finish her dance.
Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!

(CP 340)

When Yeats requests that Margot Ruddock be permitted to finish her dance—a request he repeats—his compassion for her, arguably, is tinged with the delight he wishes to prolong in seeing her as perfect image.

As Yeats rhetorically asks in the often quoted closing line of “Among School Children,” “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” (*CP* 245). This line encapsulates Yeats’s aesthetic, and recalls the multiform dancing Herodias, and her significance as a symbol for remote, self-generating art and unified being; it also reflexively draws attention to the poem as process and synthesis. It may even be that Yeats based the structure of “Among School Children” on dance form; it consists of eight stanzas, each of which is numbered, thereby emphasising their individuality as separate dance “steps” or *enchainements*, and each, except the penultimate stanza, is a complete sentence of eight lines. This structure suggests a Celtic dance comprising eight sets of dance steps, each of which, typically, lasts for the equivalent of eight bars of music, a sum total of sixty-four bars for the dance as a whole.³⁰

As in “A Prayer for My Daughter,” “Among School Children” deals with various aspects of Yeats’s thoughts about youth and age, birth and decay. (Stanzas I to IV conclude respectively with the nouns “man,” “shell,” [eggshell] “child” and “scarecrow,” thus referring to four stages of development, embryo to old age.) In the first stanza Yeats bemusedly notes that the children in the convent schoolroom (presumably all girls) are receiving the kind of education of which, elsewhere, he disapproves:

The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and histories,

³⁰ In fact, irrespective of time signature (jigs, for example, are in 6/8 time), almost all individual steps in Celtic dances take sixteen bars of music, and are counted by dancers in two series of eights.

To cut and sew, be neat in everything

In the best modern way.

(*CP* 242-3)

By implication, the “sixty-year-old smiling public man” (243), for the moment, has suspended his ideals; but in the second stanza Yeats recalls his youthful belief that Maud Gonne was the missing half of his whole being: “two natures blent / Into a sphere ... Or else, to modify the Platonic parable, / Into the yolk and white of the one shell” (243). (This image recalls Gautier’s Platonic yearning for Carlotta Grisi.) What flows from this memory is the exciting image—Yeats’s “heart is driven wild”—of Gonne when a child for whom “a hard reproof, or trivial event / ... changed some childish day to tragedy”; and this image is immediately opposed, in stanza IV, by “Her present image” where she is “Hollow of cheek” and grey-haired like Yeats, who also “Had pretty plumage once” and who is now “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (243). In the next two stanzas, Yeats’s thoughts shift, first, to how time betrays the young mother, because the “shape upon her lap / Honey of generation” will become, like him, an ageing man “With sixty or more winters on its head” (244), and then, by contrasting the metaphysical ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras with the physical decay that also reduces them to scarecrows, “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird” (244).

At last, rather like the faery dance in “Oisín” wending its way inexorably to its highest point, the “woody central hill” (*CP* 419), “Among Schoolchildren” begins to reach its ecstatic climax. In the penultimate stanza, Yeats refers to the “marble or ... bronze repose” of the images worshipped by “nuns and mothers,” whose essence as art he reveals in the last two lines. Symbolising “all heavenly glory,” art works are the

“self-born mockers of man’s enterprise” (244). As opposed to the *degeneration* of mortal life, art works are *self*-generating and immortal; embodied art like the dance, and like the Platonic hermaphrodite, gives birth to itself. As Yeats goes on to say, in the first four lines of the final stanza,

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

(245)

The poem climaxes with an exultant affirmation of art that transcends age and degeneration:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer.
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(244-5)

In the sense that the dancer is the dance, this extremely personal poem *is* its creator, and Yeats finally asserts his freedom from the tyranny of self-consciousness through a paradoxical self-creation as art that, significantly, is “rooted” deep in the Irish soil. If there is a hint of irony here, as some critics have suggested, this is because Yeats is acutely aware of the innate paradox of the dancer as an aesthetic symbol for art that both denies and yet affirms its flesh and blood creator, indeed, *life* as its source.

That Yeats uses tree symbolism in the closing stanza of “Among Schoolchildren” is not coincidental, because it reveals what for him are the essential elements of dance: it has a mystical power to transform, and its source is life itself—specifically Celtic life. This view of dance as both earthy and mystical reflects Yeats’s anti-bourgeois, anti-English Imperialism stance that links not only peasant custom with aristocratic tradition (thus excluding the bourgeois ethos), but also ancient Greek rite and Irish mysticism with Renaissance cosmology and metaphysics. Indeed, Yeats’s representation of circular and figured dance embraces both Celtic and Renaissance forms. For example, in his early story “Proud Costello, Macdermot’s Daughter and the Bitter Tongue,” from *The Secret Rose*, Yeats juxtaposes the circular dancing out-of-doors by the peasants with the Renaissance dances being performed indoors by the gentry. When Costello and his companions come to Macdermot’s house to celebrate his daughter Una’s betrothal, they see “an unusually large group of the very poor, dancing about a fire” and they hear the “sound of many feet dancing a dance of Elizabeth and James” (*Myth* 200).³¹ These latter sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century dances, according to Yeats, “had driven out, among all but the most Irish of the gentry, the quicker rhythms of the verse-interwoven, pantomimic dances of earlier days” (201). Nonetheless, Yeats’s implicit regret for the Irish aristocrats’ lack of connection with their Celtic past does not preclude his use of Renaissance dance as an expression of erotic desire; when Costello and Una rest between dances, they wait “pensively and silently for ... the fire in their hearts to leap up and to

³¹ These dances were well known throughout Britain because of the many editions of John Playford’s *The Dancing Master* that had been published regularly since 1651. A number of them were also included in Cecil Sharp’s series of *The Country Dance Book*.

wrap them anew,” and, as Yeats puts it, “so they danced Pavane and Saraband and Gallead and Morris the night long” (201-2).

Even more interesting is how, in the story “Rosa Alchemica” (1896), Yeats blends Celtic myth, Renaissance cosmology and Christian symbolism with Rosicrucian occultism to represent dance as an initiation rite. (Throughout the eighteen-nineties, Yeats was a member of the Rosicrucian order of the Golden Dawn.) Here, ritual dance is both a medium and a symbol for the transformation of the individual to a higher state of spiritual being. Having persuaded the narrator to undergo an initiation into the Order of the Alchemical Rose, Michael Robartes takes him to a place in the West of Ireland. Here, in the narrator’s words,

I would have to learn the steps of an exceedingly antique dance, because before my initiation could be perfected I had to join three times in a magical dance, for rhythm was the wheel of Eternity, on which alone the transient and accidental could be broken and the spirit set free. I found the steps, which were simple enough, resembled certain antique Greek dances, and having been a good dancer in my youth and the master of many curious Gaelic steps, I soon had them in my memory. (*Myth* 286)³²

As the narrator makes his way to the room where he must dance, he passes through “a marvellous passage, along whose sides were many divinities wrought in a mosaic, not less beautiful than the mosaic in the Baptistry at Ravenna” (288).³³ The room itself is

³² It is tempting to assume that in the last statement we hear Yeats’s voice: when he was a child living in London, he and his sister were sent to dancing lessons.

³³ Melchiori suggests that these figures are the apostles that circle the inside of the cupola of the *Battistero degli Ortodossi* (Melchior 221); thus they reinforce the spiritual importance of circular dance.

circular, and supported by pillars, each of which seems to be “a column of confused shapes, divinities it seemed of the wind,” and that appeared to move in a “whirling dance” (288). When he is himself drawn into this dance, the narrator observes that “a mysterious wave of passion, that seemed like the soul of the dance moving within our souls, took hold of me, and I was swept, neither consenting nor refusing, into the midst” (289).

In effect, Yeats transposes the Dionysian dance of the Sidhe indoors into a quasi-Renaissance setting. Moreover, at the beginning of the story, the narrator ponders the image of the Virgin in a Crivelli painting, noting that the rose in her hand “was so delicate and precise that it seemed more a thought than a flower” (268). Thus Yeats links Christian symbolism with the central symbol of Rosicrucianism: as the narrator observes later, in the dancing room, there is an immense mosaic rose on the ceiling, below which the dancers “wound in and out, tracing upon the floor the shapes of petals that copied the petals in the rose overhead” (288).³⁴ Moving in the shape of the overhead rose, the dancers embody the rose symbol as a living, dynamic reality. In other words, the symbol itself “speaks” through the dancers’ bodies, and Yeats’s rejection of abstraction takes concrete form. Even more to the point, Yeats presents an image of the dancer inseparable from the dance that predates “Among Schoolchildren,” especially since, as the petals incarnate, the dancers are the discrete parts of the whole. The narrator sees

As an illustration of the cupola shows, the figures’ heads are placed close to an inner circle and are surmounted by an undulating canopy, and their feet span the greater circumference of the outer circle. The effect of circular motion created by the figures is very powerful indeed.

³⁴ It is interesting to note that the cover design by Althea Gyles for Yeats’s poetry collection, *The Secret Rose*, shows a tree with branches interlaced in an extremely complex pattern, at the centre of which is a four-petalled rose—the central symbol for the Rosicrucian Order—surmounting a cross. At the top of the tree, the rose motif is repeated in a triad placed above the kissing faces of a man and woman, and at its base lies a prostrate skeleton interwoven by its roots. See Ellman, *Identity* 65.

the petals of the great rose, which had no longer the look of mosaic, falling slowly through the incense-heavy air, and, as they fell, shaping into the likenesses of living beings of extraordinary beauty. Still faint and cloud-like, they began to dance, and as they danced took a more and more definite shape, so that I was able to distinguish beautiful Grecian faces and august Egyptian faces. (288)

As Richard Ellman indicates, the four-petalled rose conjoined with the cross refers to the central myth of Rosicrucianism, that is, the fifth element, or quintessence, otherwise known as the “mystic marriage,” when the adept finally achieves an ecstatic transfiguration; the cross of suffering blooms as the rose of harmony, love and beauty (*Identity* 64). Indeed, the dancers superimpose the rose symbol over “a pale Christ on a pale cross” (288) that is figured in mosaic on the dancing floor, and whose unity, in Robartes’s words, they “desire to trouble ... with their multitudinous feet” (288).³⁵ If the verb “to trouble” is construed not in a negative sense, but positively, in the way that Donne uses the verbs “breake, blowe, burn” to express his desire for transformation in Holy Sonnet XIV (*CEP* 347), the dance in “Rosa Alchemica” can be seen clearly as a metaphor for the alchemist’s pounding of his base material that he wishes to turn to gold. Importantly, in the opening of the story, the narrator states that he has just published *Rosa Alchemica*, “a little book on the Alchemists,” and

had discovered ... that their doctrine was no mere chemical fantasy, but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements and to man himself;

³⁵ Yeats considered Christ an image of perfection, and a symbol of the artistic imagination. Furthermore, according to his system—and as expressed in “The Second Coming” (*CP* 210)—the birth of Christ marks the beginning of the two-thousand year cycle that was drawing to a close.

and that they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of a universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance; and this enabled me to make my little book a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art. (267)

The ritual dance is also self-creating; by their rhythmically pounding feet, the dancers enact their own transmutation into art. Moreover, the dancing petals soon pair up and their dance becomes a kind of collective *pas de deux*. The narrator observes that

soon every mortal foot danced by the whiter foot of an immortal; and in the troubled eyes that looked into the untroubled shadowy eyes ... the brightness of uttermost desire as though they had found at length, after unreckonable wandering, the lost love of their youth. (289)

Thus male and female, body and soul, mortal and immortal are reunited, an image of unified being that foreshadows Yeats's representations of the Herodias figure, the unified being that he codified later in *A Vision*, and the union of himself and Maud Gonne, in "Among School Children," where they are "two natures blent / Into a sphere" (CP 243).

It is fascinating to note that the pattern of the dance in "Rosa Alchemica" replicates the notation of the *Ballo fatto con vera Regola, perfetta Theorica, & Mathematica* which appears in one of the surviving manuals on Renaissance dance, Fabritio Caroso's *Nobilità di dame* (1605). Performed by three women and a man, and reportedly set to the verses of Ovid, and reproducing their spondaic and dactylic rhythms, this dance traced the pattern of a central six-petalled rosette motif surrounded by a six-spoked circle interwoven with two pathways. Belinda Quirey and Michael Holmes point out that figure dances such as this mirrored the Renaissance view of a harmonious and ordered universe

where the planets circled the central world, and within the moon's orbit was contained a mixture of the four elements, earth, water, air and fire. Beyond this was the unmixed fifth, the quintessence, where the soundless Music of the Spheres is played.³⁶ There is no evidence to suggest that Yeats knew of this dance, but, as his reference to Pythagoras in "Among Schoolchildren" shows, the idea of the Music of the Spheres was a prevailing one. Moreover, he would have appreciated the notion of Renaissance dancers embodying their cosmology; as Quirey and Holmes argue, the Renaissance nobleman did not view dance like a painter before a canvas, but in a participatory way. In their words,

With one half of himself, and with his active and trained aesthetic sense, he was participating in the pattern vicariously; with the other half, his keen mathematical and philosophical intellect, he was perceiving the total design as a reflection of the harmony of the universe. (197)³⁷

Similarly, the Dionysian, whirling dancers in "Rosa Alchemica" symbolise not only perfect essence, unified being and cosmic harmony, but also the process by which these states are achieved; dressed in crimson robes (287) and "flame-like" (288), they represent the self-generating, "Incorruptible Fire" (287) that transforms "all things" into "divine and imperishable substance."³⁸

³⁶ In Lynn Garafola's words, the dancers in Caroso's notation are "like Copernican planets, orbiting a sun-rayed corolla." See "Clio Meets Terpsichore," *Ballet Review* (Summer, 1986): 93. See also François Carter, "Celestial Dance: A Search for Perfection," *Dance Research* 5.2 (1987): 3-17, and "Number Symbolism and Renaissance Choreography," *Dance Research* 10.1 (1992): 21-39. A number of dance historians have suggested that whereas complex floor patterning was an important element in Court dance, only when, as bourgeois entertainment, dance shifted from the court to the theatre and was framed behind the proscenium arch, did its trajectory become vertical. See Belinda Quirey "Apology for History: The Psychological Difference, part 2, Vision in Depth," *Dancing Times* (Jan. 1971): 196-197.

³⁷ See also Günter Berghaus, "Neoplatonic and Pythagorean Notions of World Harmony and Unity and Their Influence on Renaissance Dance Theory," *Dance Research Journal* 10.2 (1992): 43-70.

³⁸ Here are also connotations of Pentecostal fire. Yeats would surely have known of the moment described in *The Acts of the Apostles* where "suddenly there came a sound as from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind ... And there appeared unto [the apostles] cloven tongues like as of fire" (2. 2-3).

Many years later, in his poems “Sailing to Byzantium” (1927) and “Byzantium” (1930), Yeats again uses the image of alchemical fire; notably, in the latter poem, the image is enhanced by being represented as self-generating, and the process of purification and transformation itself as a ritual dance. (In this respect, “Rosa Alchemica” foreshadows “Byzantium.”) In “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats makes no specific mention of ritual dance; nonetheless, images of fire and spiral movement are crucial to the poem’s meaning.

The first half of “Sailing to Byzantium” is a clear statement of the speaker’s—Yeats’s—anguish at ageing, and hence his reason for wishing to sail to Byzantium. With “The young / In one another’s arms” and the celebration of fecund life at its height by “birds in the trees ... salmon-falls ... mackerel-crowded seas / Fish, flesh, or fowl,” Ireland “is no country for old men” (*CP* 217). In marked contrast to the natural, fecund and mortal world of “dying generations” (217)—the oxymoron is supremely eloquent and Yeatsian—Byzantium is an idealised, monumental locus of art in the period “just a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato,” when “maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one” (*AV* 279). In the second half of “Sailing,” Yeats contrasts the natural life in the first with images of the immortal, incorruptible Byzantine figures, the “sages standing in God’s holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall” (217), and the Grecian “goldsmiths” who all represent this fusion of “religious, aesthetic and practical life.” He invokes the sages to “Consume my heart away; sick with desire” so he may be gathered “Into the artifice of eternity” (218) by the alchemical process that would transform him from the “paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick” (217) into “a form as Grecian goldsmiths

make”—an immortal, gilded bird “set upon a golden bough to sing” (218). The analogy is important: the *objet d’art* itself creates art—poetry—that is non-abstract because, significantly, it sings “Of what is past, or passing, or to come” (218). In other words, the gilded bird speaks of the passage of time, and, by implication, of mortal life. (Thus Sturge Moore missed the point when he chided Yeats for his representation of eternal art singing of the flux of human existence [Jeffares 353-4].)

As with “Among Schoolchildren,” Yeats uses the image of the scarecrow to represent himself as an old man. Ironically, the image of a lifeless body without flesh and blood—a frame upon which clothes hang—recalls Yeats’s earlier reference to Byzantine art’s depiction of the human figure as a metaphor for the kind of art abstracted from life that he abhorred. Accordingly, the scarecrow figure represents the final stage before death in which the creative artist becomes even further distanced from his “feminine” embodied self, and the power to think with the body. In other words, Yeats sees his ageing self as being reduced to purely abstract thought.³⁹ Remarkable in the scarecrow image is the *absence* of movement: scarecrows do not dance; only their tattered garments move with the wind (the Sidhe). Even more to the point, unlike the flame dancers in “Rosa Alchemica,” the scarecrow is incapable of *self-generated* movement; it is not the agent of its own re-creation as art. Furthermore, the image of the tattered coat “upon a stick” can be read as an oblique reference to the crucified Christ figure (sometimes referred to as nailed to a tree), and by extension, an allusion to the crucifixion symbol in “Rosa Alchemica.”

³⁹ This puts another perspective on Yeats’s motives for having the Steinach operation; rather than simply being an attempt to boost flagging sexual energy *per se*, it confirms Yeats’s belief that art derives from embodied experience, and not from purely abstract thought.

Yeats's request that the sages "come from the holy fire" is an oblique request that they perform a ritual *dance*, whereby, like the dancers in the early story, they pound out their rhythms to give him soul. And in a sense "Sailing to Byzantium" is itself a dance. As with "Among School Children," it has even stanzas—in this instance four—each numbered and comprising eight lines. There is also the suggestion of a figured dance in the way that each stanza closes with a rhyming couplet, thereby giving the impression of the completed dance step that is part of the whole.⁴⁰ In "Sailing" there is also a direct association between the image of sages that come from the "holy fire, perne in a gyre" and circular motion within circular motion. As Yeats shows in his notes to the poem "Shepherd and Goatherd," the "perne" was another name for the spool ... on which thread was wound," the direct effect of the fires from "the perne mill" (CP 531).

The images of the winding motion of the spool within the gyre and mystical fire, in "Sailing to Byzantium," are reminiscent of ritual dance; in "Byzantium," Yeats presents them in *specific* relation to such dance, and here, even more graphically than in the earlier poem, he concludes with an affirmation of art whose matrix is passionately lived life. To appreciate fully the importance of the dancer and the dance in "Byzantium," however, it is helpful first to consider the first stanza in relation to Yeats's plays *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and *A Full Moon in March*. (Although "Byzantium" was written five years earlier than these two plays, like them, it is informed by Yeats's system.) Here, Yeats presents the life/art contraries in terms that prefigure his representation of the remote Herodias/Queen and her suitors in the later plays. The

⁴⁰ Arguably, *all* poetry with structure of this kind can be seen as related to dance, given given the early association of dance with song, especially in the case of the round dance. The relationship between dance and song in the carol is of particular interest. See Percy A. Scholes, "Carols," *The Oxford Companion to Music* (London: OUP, 1974) 156-58.

chiming of the gong of St. Sophia mentioned in the opening lines, for example, has its parallel in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, where the Second Attendant strikes the gong at midnight (*CPI* 640). As in the play, this marks the suspension of time during the inhuman Phase Fifteen of Yeats's system when pure image and unity of being are achieved:

The unpurged images of day recede;
 The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
 Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
 After great cathedral gong;
 A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
 All that man is,
 All mere complexities,
 The fury and the mire of human veins.

(*CP* 280)

The disdainful dome is obviously a personified version of the remote and cruel lunar Herodias/Queen, and by contrast, the "complexities / The fury and mire of human veins" have their parallel in the Swineherd who emerges from "dust and mire" with his flesh "scratched [and] foul" (*CPI* 623).

Just as the dancer is an implicit presence in the opening lines of "Byzantium," so she haunts the second stanza, although not specifically as an Herodias figure:

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
 May unwind the winding path;
 A mouth that has no moisture and no breath

Breathless mouths may summon;
 I hail the superhuman;
 I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

(CP 280)

If the body represented as a mummy is seen as another version of the *perne* in the gyre, or circular movement within circular movement, then the first two lines of the stanza can be seen as drawn directly from an image of Loie Fuller spinning with the swathes of fabric spiralling about her. That Fuller is both agent and object—the dancer and the dance—is reflected in the lines' syntax: the transitive use of the verb “unwind” makes Hades' bobbin the initiator of rotational movement as it unwinds; the bobbin, however, has the mummy-cloth bound to it, and is thus also the object upon which rotational movement is imposed. Like the gyre, Fuller's dancing seems to recall Heraclitus's dictum, “The immortals are mortal, the mortals are immortal, each living in each others' death and dying in the others' life” (*Mem* 216).

The word “superhuman” has metaphysical connotations that relate to the insubstantial and mutating “image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than shade” at the beginning of the stanza. (Yeats's use of chiasmus and the alliterative *m* with its hypnotic sound enhance the effect of disembodiment.) According to Yeats the soul “has a plastic power, and can after death, or during life, should the vehicle leave the body for a while, mould it to any shape it will by an act of imagination” (*Myth* 349). If this plastic power belongs to the Woman of the Sidhe, the archetypal spiralling dancer whom Yeats defines as a “shape-changer,” it suggests the essence of the dancer Loie Fuller.

In the opinion of some critics, most notably Frank Kermode, Fuller's *Danse de Feu* is the precedent for the ritual fire dance in the fourth stanza, as I argue below.⁴¹ But when various eye-witness accounts of Fuller's performances, including those of Mallarmé who saw her as an aesthetic icon, are compared to Yeats's imagery in the second stanza (and to his aesthetic as a whole) they are remarkably similar. This is especially so, given Kermode's argument that in Yeats's works the dancer is a symbol of the poetic image itself. Indeed, the essence of Fuller's performances lay in the insubstantiality and heterogeneity of the ever-changing, floating shapes she created with the swathes of fabric she twirled and rotated through the air as she moved. The English dance historian Crawford Flitch put it succinctly when he wrote, "[Fuller] was never a great dancer, she was an apparition" (Flitch 8). Similarly, in his article "La Loïe" (*sic*) published in *Le Journal*, October 29, 1897, Jean Lorrain writes,

Dans une mer de ténèbres, une forme grise, indécise, flotte ainsi qu'un fantôme, et puis, soudain, sous un jet de lumière, une blancheur spectrale, une terrifiante apparition. Est-ce une morte crucifiée, voletant au-dessus d'un charnier, les bras encore tendus sous les plis de son suaire, quelque immense et pâle oiseau des mers du pôle ... ou bien quelque lémure se rendant au sabbat, martyre des temps antiques ou goule de cimetières? (qtd. in Ducrey 484)⁴²

⁴¹ According to Richard Current and Marcie Current, Fuller first performed *La Danse de Feu* in 1897. This was the same year that Yeats wrote "Rosa Alchemica."

⁴² The French placed the diaeresis over the *i* in Fuller's name to avoid its otherwise unfortunate meaning of "goose" or, colloquially, "scatty girl."



Fig. 14a. Toulouse Lautrec, watercolour of Loie Fuller.



Fig. 15. Loie Fuller in *Danse de Lys*.



Fig. 14b. Toulouse Lautrec, watercolour of Loie Fuller.

For Lorrain, Fuller's spiralling movements create insubstantial and indeterminate shapes that blur the boundaries between life and death. If his description summons up images of Gautier's ghostly wilis, and, by association, the earlier writer's various other *vivantes-mortes*, it equally seems to prefigure Yeats's imagery in "Byzantium."

Furthermore, although Loie Fuller is the agent of her movements, when she creates her multiform images she effectively erases her body, and this was why Mallarmé saw her as an icon of symbolist art.⁴³ Several years before Fuller's debut in Paris in 1892, he had written in *Crayonné au théâtre*:

A savoir que la danseuse *n'est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle *n'est pas une femme*, mais une métaphor résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur etc., et *qu'elle ne danse pas*, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élans, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe. (Mallarmé OC 304)

When Fuller performed, she was the realisation of Mallarmé's ideal: symbolic art that transcended its medium and showed no trace of its creator. Likewise, Fuller meets Yeats's aesthetic requirement that the dancer not display her physical charms, or her "chambermaid face"; in effect, Fuller is masked, and her performances are analogous to

⁴³ As his series of lithographs featuring Loie Fuller show, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec certainly did not see a dancer displaying her physical attributes, but billowing, cloud-like shapes that reveal only a blurred head. In fact, it is reported that Toulouse-Lautrec lacked interest in Fuller because he could not find the "real person" in her performances. See Current (130).

I was fortunate enough to see a short film of Fuller performing in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, July, 2000. Because it was in black and white, any possible effects of coloured lighting were lost, but my memory is of the continuous undulating and circular movement of pale fabric that completely masked Fuller's body.

Yeats's ideal work of art, embodied, but transcendent. Significantly, this is an ideal that Yeats considered to be fulfilled by Byzantine art:

The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They would copy out of old gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image; and this vision, this proclamation [is] of their invisible master. (*AV* 279-281)

The gilded bird untainted by human imprint in "Sailing" reappears in the third stanza of "Byzantium," but here it does not sing of life. "Planted on the star-lit golden bough," this "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork / More miracle than bird or handiwork" is celebrated because it "scorn[s] aloud / In glory of changeless metal / Common bird or petal / And all the complexities of mire or blood" (281). Again, Yeats presents an image of art not only detached from, but also under the influence of, the "embittered" moon that, like the lunar Queen, is contemptuous of flesh and blood life that stands in opposition to the cold perfection of the art work. And, in the penultimate stanza, life is ostensibly purified of all traces of humanity, significantly, through a ritual fire dance:

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come

And all complexities of fury leave,
 Dying into a dance,
 An agony of trance,
 An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

(281)

Yeats's image of flames that are "self-begotten," as opposed to "made" (the biblical allusion is unmistakeable), and therefore in contrast to the mortal "blood-begotten spirits," seems to be drawn directly from contemporary descriptions of Loie Fuller's *La Danse du Feu*. This dance was performed on a glass plate lit from below by red lamps that played upon Fuller's gown and the great swathes of fabric she manipulated, thereby creating the extraordinary illusion that Fuller *was* the fire that seemed to consume, yet not consume, her. Lorrain's description of *La Danse du Feu* is of particular interest because it seems to inform Yeats's depictions of the ritual fire dance in "Byzantium":

la Loïe Fuller ne brûle pas: elle filtre et suinte de la clarté, elle est la flamme elle-même. Debout dans un brasier, elle sourit, et son sourire a l'air d'un rictus de masque sous le voile rouge dont elle s'enveloppe, ce voile qu'elle agite et fait onduler comme une fumée d'incendie le long de sa nudité de lave, et c'est Herculaneum ensevelie sous la cendre, et c'est aussi le Styx et les rives infernales, et c'est la Vésuve aussi et sa gueule entr'ouverte crachant le feu de la terre, et c'est la femme de Loth figée en statue de sel dans le rougeoiement des cinq villes maudites que cette nudité immobile et pourtant

souriante, au milieu d'un brasier avec le feu du ciel et de l'enfer pour voile.

(qtd. in Ducrey 497)

Nonetheless, Fuller is a flesh and blood woman; thus in the *Danse du feu* she embodies the body/soul, flux/permanence, and life/art antinomies that concerned Yeats throughout his life. Yet, as Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux suggests, Yeats's Byzantium poems raise doubts about the eternal changelessness of art, because, as she puts it, "Yeats knew, of course, that all art fixes life, and thus destroys much of its wonder and pleasure"; and she goes on to say that "Yeats's heart lay, perhaps despite himself, with the 'mire and blood' of mortal life" (Loizeaux 157). In "Byzantium," there is an obvious paradox in an immutable, seemingly immortal, gilded bird being personified, and, like the organic life it eschews, being "*Planted* on the star-lit golden bough" (my emphasis). Yeats undercuts the notion of art detached from life in preference for art that embodies life, and it is rewarding to return to the opening stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" and note that his language is alive with the sound and movement of "The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees / ... / the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, / Fish, flesh, or fowl" which "commend all summer long" the "sensual music" of mortal life. Where all this vitality is ponderously silenced and stilled in the closing line by the "Monuments of unageing intellect," there seems to be little to celebrate in achieving immortality through art. Here, the triumphs of the intellect are not expressed as something positive, but, rather, in "*unageing*," as a negation. Furthermore, in the final stanza, symbolic art is achieved through the union of disembodied abstraction and life; it is art whose images "*Fresh images beget*" (my emphasis: clearly Yeats's allusion to sexual reproduction is deliberate). Indeed, as in his late plays, the analogy is sexual; the

final stanza opens with the lines “Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood / Spirit after spirit!” a remarkably sensual image of sexual congress. And where the “Marbles of the dancing floor / Break bitter furies of complexity,” the dancer—a symbol of unity—paradoxically produces the multiple images of symbolic art that defy closure. Indeed, where Yeats’s closing line celebrates the art/life oppositions in terms of his notion of the *Antithetical* (or *subjective*) and *Primary* (or *objective*), he does so in images that evoke their prodigious energy and power, and above all, “That dolphin-torn” counterbalance “that gong-tormented sea” (281).

It is relevant to consider how, as a poem, “Byzantium” is shaped like the dance from which it takes its symbols. As with “Sailing,” dance-like movement and rhythm form the poem’s structural basis; moreover, the poem is itself a metaphor for circular movement *danced* within circular movement. The line “For Hades’ bobbin bound in mummy-cloth” is constructed in five iambic feet with the stress reinforced by the alliterating *b*, thereby suggesting not only the continuum of the winding up process, but also a turning folk-dance step in duple time. The unstressed “For” matches the introductory “and,” or anacrusis, that precedes a dancer’s initial step, and the ensuing accented syllables coincide with the downward tread of the leading foot. Conversely, the unwinding referred to in the next line suggests a dancer’s step that circles in the opposite direction: the run-on from “Mummy-cloth” to the accented “May” which commences the trochaic rhythm of the next line coincides with the change of foot as the dancer elides the unaccented step and begins to “unwind.”⁴⁴ At this point, the poem itself “dances”; like a dance, the visual image moves to its accompanying rhythm. As Terri Mester notes, the

⁴⁴ The dancer would recognise this as the standard turning *pas de basque* or pivot step as danced *sur place* clockwise then counterclockwise. Its rhythm is counted as & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4.

heavily stressed rhyming words “dance” and “trance” in the fourth stanza mimic stamping feet. Both words also conclude lines of only six syllables, considerably shorter than the previous five lines of up to eleven syllables, and the final line of twelve. As in “Among Schoolchildren” and “Sailing to Byzantium,” this structure, consistent throughout the poem, suggests the even patterns and rhythmic consistency of a dance comprising individual figures, and the eight-line structure of each verse replicates the eight-phrase structure of the dance in its entirety.

There is also a wider orbit of circular movement that encloses the dance in “Byzantium,” and it is suggestive of the interlocking gyres as described in *A Vision*. This is produced by the overlapping antitheses in the poem’s imagery. The poem opens and closes with the gong of St. Sophia. But whereas, in the first stanza, the dross of everyday life is dismissed by the gong, in the last, it is summoned: “the unpurged images of day recede” from Byzantium “After great cathedral gong,” yet finally the spirits are drawn “Astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood,” (33) across “that gong-tormented sea” (40). The image of the shade in the second stanza parallels and foreshadows the dancer as a symbol of self-generating art in the penultimate stanza, and it is at the central point of the poem that the crafted bird of “changeless metal” is perched upon “the star-lit golden bough,” scorning mortal life. Thus the central, third stanza marks the ultimate expansion of the gyre, before the poem’s reverse movement back to its starting point.

The Yeats poem that perhaps more than any other draws its rhythm and structure from circular motion, and the images it generates is “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” Written in the year of its title, in response to recent atrocities committed by the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is the result of

Yeats's horror at politically motivated violence, and, like the constantly shifting shapes instigated by Loie Fuller's dancing, each of its six parts presents an aspect of civilisation's breakdown, until finally there is chaos.

Importantly, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" moves like the double gyres as, in terms of Yeats's system, one two-thousand-year Phase dies, and the next, its antithesis, comes into being. There is a sense of "death-in-life and life-in-death" as the balance of these antinomies shifts. Moreover, the poem moves in circular fashion both within each stanza, and as a whole, sedately at first, then gathering momentum like the dance of the Sidhe, and, more graphically, like Loie Fuller's whirling silk. Indeed, where Yeats features her in part II of the poem, Fuller's dancing provides an analogy for the poem as a whole:

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
 A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
 It seemed that a dragon of air
 Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
 Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
 So the Platonic Year
 Whirls out new right and wrong,
 Whirls in the old instead;
 All men are dancers and their tread
 Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

(CP 234)

Throughout the six stanzas that comprise part I of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats sustains an *ottava rima* structure whose symmetry at first harmonises with the “ornamental bronze and stone,” the “ancient image made of olive wood,” and “Phidias’ famous ivories” to which he refers in the first stanza. But, after expressing regret at the loss of beauty, Yeats almost immediately introduces the image of the lunar circle, and, by implication, the remote Herodias, and the dance of the Sidhe:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
Protected from the circle of the moon
That pitches common things about.

(232)

The image of “common things” being tossed about has connotations of the wind, and occurring as it does in the fourth line of the eight-line stanza, initiates the return of the stanza’s focus on what has been lost. The rhyming couplet, “And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories / And all the golden grasshoppers and bees” (233)—given further emphasis by *enjambement*—returns verbally and thematically to the “lovely things that are gone” in the opening line.

In the second stanza, Yeats continues to reflect on a lost past where “we thought / That the worst rogues and rascals had died out,” and he creates a moment of calm and stillness that is continued into the third stanza with its first two lines, “All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned, / And a great army but a showy thing” (233). This waning of energy is sustained to the point of languor until the final line where “The guardsmen’s drowsy chargers would not prance” (233). (Indeed, this last line is

suggestive of a refusal to dance.) An explosion of energy introduces stanza four: “Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare / Rides upon sleep,” and there is an intimation of the chaos with which the poem finishes. There are obvious connotations of the witch, or the Sidhe, riding the wind that Yeats makes even more explicit in the stanza’s circular structure. After presenting the horrifying image of “the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood”—the victim is a *benign* woman—the stanza closes with the “weasels fighting in a hole” who are, in effect witches.⁴⁵ Closing the circle of part I, the last two stanzas decrease in momentum as “He who can read the signs,” gradually reaches the conclusion that there is nothing of comfort, that he must suffer “ghostly solitude.” And the rhetorical question in the last stanza, “What more is there to say?”, suggests inaction or stasis born of powerlessness because “Man is in love and loves what vanishes”: there is always the “incendiary or bigot” ready to wreak destruction. And it is those things to which this stanza returns for its closure: the “famous ivories,” and “grasshoppers and bees” close the rhyming couplets of both stanzas one and six.

As David B. McWhirter puts it, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”

employs a form that seems always on the verge of collapsing into loosely strung-together sequences of short lyrics. Abrupt emotional turns and sudden shifts in tone and imagery produce a disjunctive effect, a sense of unresolved multiplicity of perspectives. (McWhirter 44)

This is certainly true of the poem where it seems to shift from part I to an entirely different sphere in part II. In what seems to be an interlude—part II is comprised of a single stanza—Loie Fuller and her “Chinese dancers” suddenly emerge from the very air

⁴⁵ According to Lady Wilde, in *Ancient Legends of Ireland*, weasels are a form taken by witches (CCP 276).

that Yeats says had “fallen among” them in the form of a dragon and “whirled them around” (234).⁴⁶ There is a sense of continuous, sensuous movement in these lines that enhances the “shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth” in the second line, and provides a graphic contrast to the earth-bound “stump” and the verbs of destruction “burn” and “break” at the end of part I. The effect is of the wind rising and spiralling like the Sidhe—Yeats uses the verb “whirl” three times—and it is analogous to the relentless “furious” path of the gyres. Furthermore, as in those before, this stanza completes its own circle with a semantic link: here, it is the word “dancers.” What has changed, however, is that these dancers are men, and where their “tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong,” they are what the Platonic year has “whirled” in, the antithesis of the airborne Fuller and her exotic dancing women. As I state above, this stanza is a microcosm of the poem as a whole, and the closing lines foreshadow part VI, the final stanza.

In fact, what at first seems a disjointed structure—the effect to which McWhirter refers—is like the multiple shapes of Fuller’s great swathes of fabric that constantly change shape and tone, in response to the dancer’s movements, and to the light played upon them. Moreover, just as Fuller is erased by the images she creates, so in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” the spiralling wind is the unseen force that generates the discrete images and, as it were, tosses them about, yet unifies the poem as a whole. Wind-borne movement is a prevailing image in part III where the swan is a metaphor for “the solitary soul” whose wings are “half spread for flight,” and thus divided between “play” and the wish “to ride / Those winds that clamour of approaching night” (235). In the course of “his secret meditation” wherein “man” is “lost amid the labyrinth he has made,” the

⁴⁶ As I implied earlier, the rhythmic demands of the verse require that the dancers be “Chinese” rather than, more accurately, “Japanese.”

swan, by the third stanza, “has leaped into the desolate heaven” (235). Then the lines sweep ahead with the anguish that that image brings for Yeats, and in the final five lines *enjambement* and the repetitive *w* reinforce the visual and aural effect of the rising wind, and the disillusionment it brings:

That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
 To end all things, to end
 What my laborious life imagined, even
 The half-imagined, the half-written page;
 O but we dreamed to mend
 Whatever mischief seemed
 To afflict mankind, but now
 That winds of winter blow
 Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.

(235)

Without respite, the reader is swept into the brief part IV whose “Shriek” is that of the accelerating wind and rising savagery:

We, who seven years ago
 Talked of honour and of truth,
 Shriek with pleasure if we show
 The weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth.

(235-6)

And part V, like a “levelling wind” (236), sustains its fast pace in verse of predominantly short, run-on lines that are in contrast to the sedate, courtly dance pace of the ten and

eleven syllabic lines in part I. With their regular rhyme scheme abababb, these four stanzas have a continuity and pace reminiscent of the faeries' chain dance in "The Wanderings of Oisín"; indeed, the imperatives to mock "the great," "the wise," and "the good" that begin each stanza, and the "Mock mockers" that begins the last, recalls Oisín's remark, "And in a wild and sudden dance / We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance" (CP 418). In addition to giving part V of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" a linguistic continuity that reinforces the sense that its verse *is* a dance, this repetition repeats the expanding and contracting motion of the previous sections. The final word "mockery" echoes the trisyllabic "let us mock" in the closing line.

The final stanza, the climax of the poem, opens with, and repeats the word "violence" whose import is emphasised by brief pauses before the circular momentum gathers:

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;
 Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded
 On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,
 But wearied running round and round in their courses
 All break and vanish, and evil gathers head.

(237)

The second line recalls Maud Gonne riding gracefully among the Irish peasants, appearing to them as a Woman of the Sidhe. But these horse-riders are not benign; the violence that has been unleashed by the Irish nationalism Gonne espoused has now multiplied, and is out of control. Yeats finally identifies the dancers whose force has been

gathering throughout the poem and with whom she is associated. And there seem to be hordes of them:

Herodias' daughters have returned again,
A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;
And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,
According to the wind, for all are blind.

(237)

These women are not rooted, like the tree that Yeats saw as a metaphor for his daughter, Anne; they are wild and swirl in a blurred frenzy of non-differentiation, tearing up the Irish earth, as if in a tornado. And these *are* witches: they are multiple Maud Gones with their “stone-doll” castrating obsessions that according to Yeats have destroyed art—all the “ingenious lovely things” (232) that have gone.⁴⁷ It is significant that some years after Yeats wrote these lines, he told Olivia Shakespear that Gonne “had to choose (perhaps all women must) between broomstick and distaff and she has chosen the broomstick—I mean the witches’ hats” (*Letters* 697).

Finally, in the eye of the storm, when the “wind drops, dust settles,”

There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson

⁴⁷ As Jeffares points out, there was a traditional procession of witches on St. John the Baptist’s Eve (*CCP* 279).

To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
 Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.

(237)

The demonic women have brought forth their offspring, the demon child, the Son of Art, the incubus of the mythic witch of Irish folk lore, Lady Kyteler, who pampers him with her gifts.

Thus, according to Yeats's system, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" marks the end of a two-thousand year *subjective* phase of history, and the shape-changing dancer is both the symbol, and the agent of its demise. She has evolved from Gautier's ideal of chastely erotic, unattainable beauty, to the threatening vampire that repelled and fascinated Symons, and here to the ambiguous and wild figure of the Sidhe—Herodias, Fand, Hawk Woman, and witch. Inseparable from what she creates, the dancer and her dance symbolise for Yeats the relentless spiralling momentum of history that inevitably gives birth to a new *Primary* phase of civilisation. And this phase brings with it chaos and engulfment, emblematised in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" as the Son of Art, and in "The Second Coming" as the lurching, insolent, half-beast, half-man that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" (CP 211).

For Yeats as for Symons and Gautier, the woman who dances is a symbol for art because she is transgressive. As body unified with spirit, elemental and Dionysian, the dancer is the transgressive Other who threatens engulfment and the loss of control. As a late Romantic poet, Yeats does not escape seeing woman and the feminine as a scapegoat for the chaos and violence of the patriarchal, Imperialistic world he eschewed.

Conclusion

When Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* presented their first season in Paris during May and June 1909, they performed a number of ballets never before seen in the West: *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, "The Polovtsian Dances" from the opera *Prince Igor*, *Le Festin*, *Les Sylphides* and *Cléopâtre*. Audiences and critics alike knew they were witnessing the advent of a new era in classical ballet, and this was confirmed when, in the following year, the *Ballets Russes* presented even more dazzling new works, among them, *Schéhérazade* and *L'Oiseau de Feu*.¹ Ballet in the West had been in long decline as high art, but now it returned in works of stunning theatrical power, notable for their synthesis of music, design and choreography.

The writer and critic Camille Mauclair even suggested that the works presented by the *Ballets Russes* surpassed the Wagnerian ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

Ce spectacle de rêve auprès duquel la fusion Wagnérienne elle-même n'est qu'une gaucherie barbare, ce spectacle où toutes les sensations se répondent et se tissent par leur entrecroisement incessant ... la collaboration du décor, des lumières, des costumes, de la pantomime, institue des rapports inconnus dans la pensée. (Qtd. in Priddin 106)²

¹ See Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: OUP, 1989). See S. L. Grigoriev, trans. Vera Bowen, *The Diaghilev Ballet: 1909-1929* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960) 30-35. Grigoriev was a dancer and *régisiseur* who helped Diaghilev with the planning and administering of the Paris seasons of the *Ballets Russes*.

² For the next twenty years, the *Ballets Russes* presented works that were the collaboration between composers, writers and choreographers—a formidable line-up of some of the most dominant figures in

André Ghéon considered that the *Ballets Russes*—“Ballet d’art, féerie d’art”—was “le rêve (*sic*) de Mallarmé, notre rêve (*sic*) se réalisé” (qtd. in Priddin, 112). As Frank Kermode puts it, this dream was for “a stage liberated from cardboard falsities; which emerged from a confluence of the other arts yet remained, as Wagner did not, theatre” (PD 1).

The *Ballets Russes* has a unique place in theatre history, both as the culmination of the Romantic and *Symboliste/Décadent* aesthetic, and as a touchstone for modernism. As Terri Mester demonstrates in *Movement and Modernism*, T.S. Eliot avidly attended performances of the *Ballets Russes*, and a number of dancers from the troupe, especially Nijinsky, influenced his works. She shows that Nijinsky’s dancing in *Narcisse* and *Le Spectre de la rose*” (1911) inspired, respectively, an early unpublished work, “The Death of Narcissus” (1915), and the much later “Little Gidding” (1942), and that his Petrouchka becomes the puppet-like figures in “The Hollow Men” (1925). Mester also shows that Nijinsky’s primitivist choreography in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) influenced Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” (1935).

That Eliot sees the *male* dancer as his ideal runs seems to run counter to the Romantic cult of the ballerina; but consistent with nineteenth-century gender constructs, and in an echo of Arthur Symons’s vision of the female dancer, he uses the dancer Serafima Astafieva as the basis for Grishkin, the prostitute in “Whispers of Immortality” (Mester 71). Nonetheless, of interest is Eliot’s response to Léonid Massine, the dancer with whom he declared he was “in love” (*Letters* 253), and whom he describes in

Modernist art. Among composers, the most notable was Igor Stravinsky, but others included Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Constant Lambert; among the designers were Natalia Gontcharova, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and Maurice Utrillo, and the choreographers included Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, Léonide Massine, and George Balanchine.

language that recalls Mallarmé's eliding of the dancer's flesh and blood reality, and Yeats's interest in masking his performers. Eliot saw Massine as an example of art at its most "inhuman," and "abstract" (Mester 67-89). Clearly, Eliot's dissociating of the performer from the work of art both derives from Mallarmé's notion of art that is pure because it refers to nothing beyond itself, and parallels Yeats's version of the dehumanised Herodias figure (in praxis, the masked Woman of the Sidhe in his plays).

Associated with the notion of pure, dehumanised art is the modernist idea of its spirituality, and of the dancer as a spiritual being who has overcome her body's limitations (hence Edward Gordon Craig's preference for puppets). In her autobiography, Natalia Makarova writes of ballet in quasi-religious and ethical terms, positing "spirituality" as the essence of classical ballet. In her words, "dancing means overcoming that formality of movement, it means spirituality—otherwise what good is it?" (Makarova 34). She also states, "I believe the body can overcome its corporeality through the magic of inspiration and can be transfigured into a musical phrase" (35), and "if a dancer's body is incapable of filling movement with *meaning*, in order to convey to the audience an equivalent mood, a sense of life, in order to *disturb*, then such a body has no place in the ballet" (Makarova's emphasis, 34). Even more remarkably, Makarova sees the struggle to gain the technical perfection of classical ballet as one between the will's drive to transcendence and the body's flaws and omissions:

[t]here is a special pleasure and special satisfaction in this, an almost masochistic pleasure in the body's rebelling, its aching and hurting. And you bring it under control and make it responsive to that which the soul is eager to make manifest. (36)

Makarova's quasi-religious images of asceticism and self-mortification reflect the Western philosophical and Christian anti-body bias, that the body must be overcome, and transcended. As the ballet dancer striving for perfection before the mirror knows, she is constantly striving to master her body (my choice of verb, with its gender implications is deliberate), to erase the (female) self in order to produce the line, symmetry, and perfection of form required of the classical dancer. Indeed, Makarova's attitude to the body is informed by an internalised nineteenth-century construct of the Romantic ballerina as idealised "spiritual" woman, and it is one that remains to this day.³

In referring to the legendary Anna Pavlova—the dancer whom Yeats proclaimed "had the cry"—Makarova declares, "The concept of 'spirituality' ... was born with [her] appearance, the incarnation of the eternal feminine, of 'the dancing of the soul' on stage," and she then relates this directly to "Giselle's arabesque," describing it as "incorporeal, airy, the arabesque of a phantom that is the very substance of the feminine" (36).

In fact, Pavlova's fame rested in large part on her performance of "The Dying Swan," choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, the early choreographer for the *Ballets Russes*.⁴ It is important to note, therefore, that although Fokine was inspired by Isadora Duncan's "free" dancing, he did not reject classical ballet *per se*, but, rather, wished to reform what for him had become an art form stripped of spirituality and reduced to mere

³ This is especially true of the Balanchine-type ballerina.

⁴ Arguably, the legacy of Pavlova in her role as the swan was to make ballet dancing respectable for middle-class girls, precisely because she presented the feminine ideals of demureness, purity and acquiescence to suffering.

acrobatics. Describing ballet as creating a “world of fragile dreams,” (the language is remarkably Gautierien), he states in his principles of dance that

a dance is the development and ideal of the sign. The ballet renounced expression and consequently dancing became acrobatic, mechanical, and empty. In order to restore dancing its soul we must abandon fixed signs and devise others based on the laws of natural expression.... Certainly, an *arabesque* is sensible when it idealises the sign, because it suggests the body’s straining to soar upward.... If there be no expression, no sign, but merely a foot raised in the position termed *en arabesque*, it looks foolish. (Steinberg 18)⁵

Like Yeats, Fokine sees late nineteenth-century ballet as absurd and lacking in expressive—symbolic—power, and like Yeats, and Gautier, he sees the *expressive* dancing body as a symbol for the spiritualised word. As he puts it,

There is a vast difference between the dancers of the beginning of the nineteenth century, when ballet reached its height in beauty, and those at the end of the century, when beauty was forced to give place to acrobatics.... Taglioni raises herself *sur les pointes* in order to be so light as to seem hardly to touch the ground. The dancer of the period when ballet was in decline uses her *pointes* in order to astonish the audience with their strength and endurance. She fills up the toe of her satin shoe and jumps on it so that the toe hits the ground with all the strength of her muscular feet. The “steel”

⁵ This is a reprint of Fokine’s five artistic principles published in the London *Times* July 6, 1914. 18-19.

toe is a horrible invention of the ballet in decline. In its days of greatness, supernatural lightness was the ideal. (Steinberg 19)

Fokine's reference to Taglioni is important because among the works presented by the *Ballets Russes* in the 1909 season was *Les Sylphides*, a restaging and re-emphasising of his ideal of Romantic ballet; as is obvious from the title, in this ballet Fokine actually multiplies the white-gowned, Taglioni-esque sylph floating about in a sylvan glade.⁶ It is intriguing to note that Fokine took two of Gautier's literary works as his inspiration for ballets: *Le Pavillon d'Armide* (Pavlova danced the lead role), and *Le Spectre de la Rose*. The former is based on the short story "Omphale" which tells of a beautiful woman who descends from a tapestry to seduce the young narrator, and the later, on the poem "Le Spectre de la Rose" where the spirit of the rose reveals a highly eroticised, thanatal desire for a virginal young girl.⁷ (Interestingly, in the ballet, the spirit of the rose is personified by the androgynous, pink-clad Nijinsky.) Moreover, Fokine shared Gautier's taste for Orientalised eroticism: his ballet *Schéhérazade* stunned Paris with its sumptuous, brilliantly coloured set by Bakst, its lush romantic score by Rimsky-Korsakov, and its orgy set in a harem culminating in the wholesale slaughter of slaves and concubines.⁸ Thus Fokine shared, and promulgated, the Romantic writer's taste for a

⁶ Of Anna Pavlova's dancing in *Les Sylphides*, Grigoriev writes, "She was the very essence of the romantic, ethereal and unearthly, a sylphide incarnate; ... in the opinion of all who saw her [she] was a second Taglioni" (Grigoriev 33).

⁷ It is interesting to note that, in its theme of supernatural woman who descends to earth to choose her mortal lover, "Omphale" foreshadows both the novel *Spirite* and Gautier's ballet *La Péri*, and that the spirit in the poem has a similar death-wish to Meïamoun in *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre*.

⁸ As Mester points out, *Schéhérazade* was being staged in London during suffragette demonstrations. That the women on the stage were being aesthetically "slaughtered" while those in the street were demanding their rights seems to express the prevailing male hostility to women who transgress "normal" codes of behaviour.

staged, aestheticised eroticism that provided wish-fulfilment, but also mitigated female sexual power.

The notion of pure art associated with the ideal of the dancer as a spiritualised being presents difficulties for male writers who cannot escape prevailing discourses that represent dancing woman as intrinsically erotic, and their sexuality as potentially emasculating. As I have shown, Gautier, Symons and Yeats each dealt with this paradox in his individual way. Gautier posits an eroticism that is pure *because* it is art, and ultimately creates the fantasy of a platonic reunion with his beloved dancer, the chastely erotic Carlotta Grisi/Giselle. Symons proclaims his “divided” identity as the man who plunges into the febrile world of the music-hall and café-concert for erotic stimulation, yet fashions himself as a poet who theorises about dance as an abstract principle, and who writes “transcendent,” symbolist verse. And Yeats creates a “system” by which he can synthesise not only oppositions of the erotic body and the transcendent spirit, but all antinomies: at the fifteenth phase of the moon, there is the perfect equilibrium of the dancer who is the dance.

These three writers, Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and William Butler Yeats, saw the dancer as an aesthetic symbol because she represented the antithesis of a patriarchal tradition that privileged the mind and soul over the body—the flesh and blood human being. But no one can break free from the social context to which he or she belongs, and all three in some degree saw the female dancer as a threat to male autonomy. Ultimately, they assert their status as the privileged sex, enjoying their freedom to be writers and poets, and to objectify women; the ideal of unity was a fantasy that mitigated the threat of real women, and that kept the *male* creative subject in

control. For Gautier, the French Romantic advocate of *l'art pour l'art*, Symons, the self-styled Symbolist, and Yeats, the Irish nationalist and self-confessed “last Romantic,” the dancer is the symbol for an ideal of art that she creates—the dance. It is time, therefore, for the dancer, whether *en pointe*, or dancing “free,” to claim the dance as hers, and to refuse to be the idealised object of male abstraction.

Bibliography

For clarity, I have included in the list of primary texts only works written by the three writers discussed in this thesis: Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats. The list of secondary sources includes all other works.

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